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Chronicles

A MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN CULTURE

AMBER WAVES OF GRAIN:
The American Country

Fred Chappell Links the Future of Poetry with the Fate of the Farm

Andrei Navrozov Interviews "Tartar" artist Igor Galanin

WENDELL BERRY
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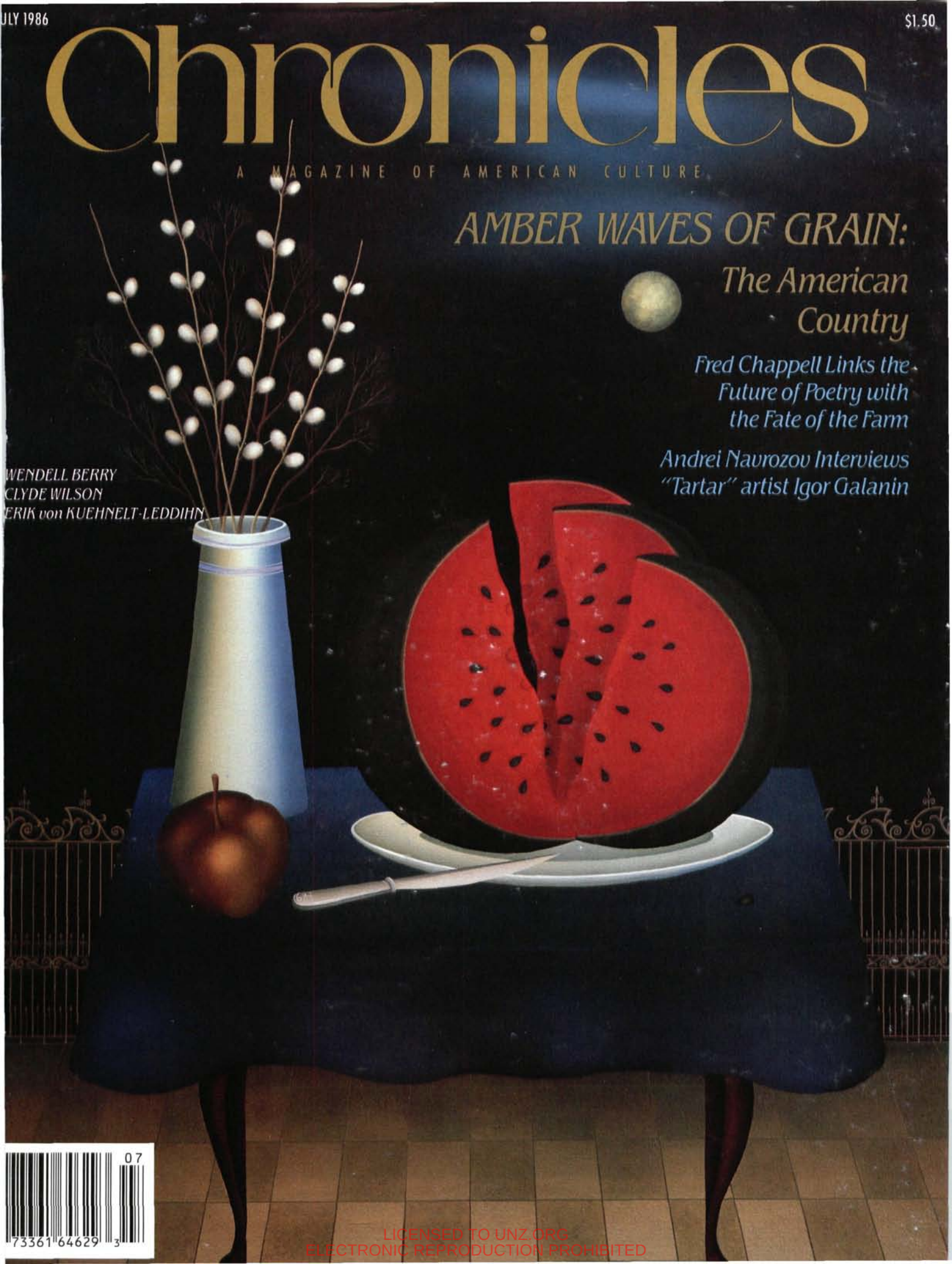

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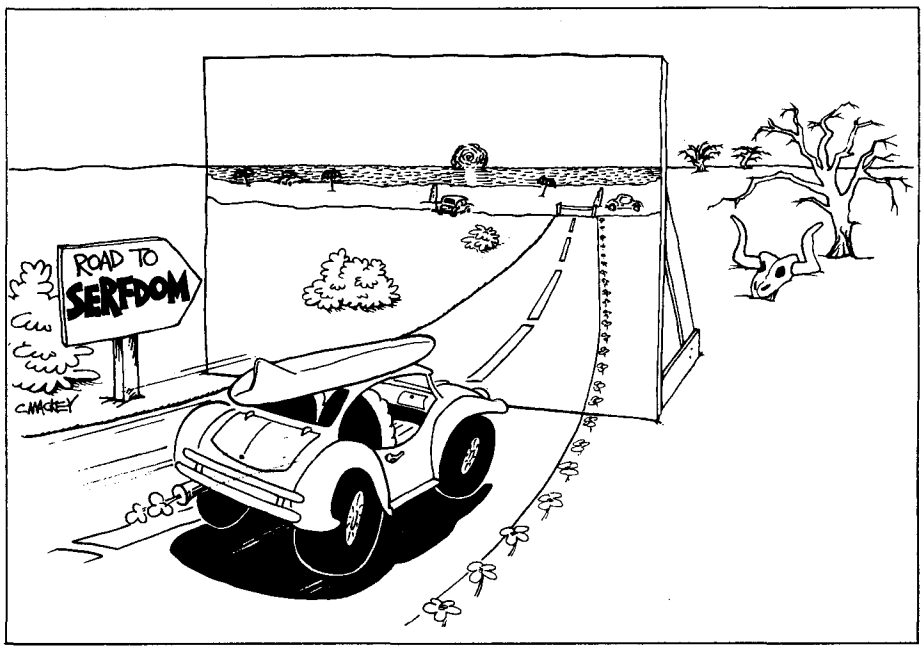
Serf City, Here We Come



Before the ideas of free trade and democracy became popular, most societies were based on feudalism. Kings were all-powerful. Under them were nobles, craftsmen and peasant farmers, known as serfs.

Serfs usually had no rights. Whatever food they ate, clothes they wore and dwellings they lived in, they received from the generosity of kings and nobles. Just as the upper class could grant these essentials, they could also deny them or tax them away. The life of a serf was hard, cheerless and quite often short.

During the long march of time, democracy and free enterprise broke down the old social order. Individuals were recognized for their own worth and were free to enjoy the fruits of their labor and to determine their own futures. The serf class disappeared.

But as this culture of free men and free markets grew into a society of unprecedented prosperity and social mobility, a curious thing happened—men and women began to entrust a growing share of responsibility over their lives to government.

Government has assumed many of the same traits of the old feudal order. We find tax cuts described as "subsidies," as if the earnings were not our own, but a gift from the state. We find regulatory bureaucracies extending their power to every aspect of society, telling people how they may or may not conduct their lives. And we find government planners who believe the economy functions best when tightly controlled by the state.

Nobel prize-winning economist F.A. Hayek described this reversal as "the road to serfdom." But you as a voter, a taxpayer, a parent and worker, are in the driver's seat—you and millions like you.

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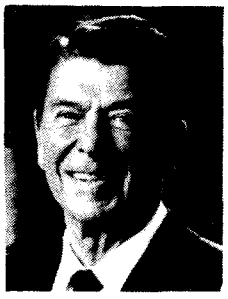

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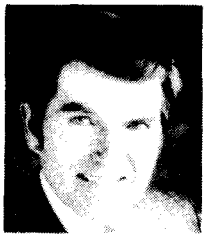

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AMBER WAVES OF GRAIN

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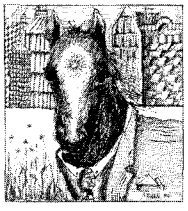

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Jesse the farmer has been making headlines in the Midwest. Now credentialed as an American diplomat promoting peace with Syria, Cuba, and the Soviet Union and as the only legitimate spokesman for oppressed minorities, Jesse Jackson has recently proclaimed himself a leader of the nation's troubled farmers. Last spring, the Rev (wearing overalls and a hat bearing the slogan "I'm Proud to be a Farmer") drove the lead tractor in a 50-vehicle protest parade in Chillicothe, Missouri. In a speech, Jackson offered sympathy for the farmers' plight and called for "a state of emergency, a moratorium on farm foreclosures."

As an agricultural expert, Jackson has few credentials—except perhaps as the country's leading breeder of bull off-the-hoof. The thought of Jesse buckin' bails, milkin' cows, hoein' beets, or doing a lick of farm work strains credulity, but—not to worry—Jesse believes that a coalition of "the eaters and feeders" can effect rural justice. An area farmer quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* praised Jackson for his advocacy of the farmers' cause: "The colored people understand our problems a lot better than a lot of white people."

The "white people" that farmers trust least these days may be the Jews. According to a recent Louis Harris poll commissioned by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, more than one in 10 rural Iowans and Nebraskans now blame Jews for their problems. The number of anti-Semites in overalls is still relatively small—only 13 percent—but the Associated Press quoted a prominent farm leader from Iowa saying that anti-Jewish attitudes "have worked their way into the mainstream of rural communities." This poll gives a fresh perspective on all the recent propaganda against "the bankers" and suggests that the Rev. Jackson may be finding a fresh audience for his own unique brand of humor. With The Order in disarray, Jesse stands to add a new color to his Rainbow Coalition.

Democracy is stifling the arts in Tacoma, Washington. At least that's the perception of the Kultur Kritiker at *ARTnews*. They are afraid that a recent Tacoma referendum on tax-subsidized art could be "a harbinger of challenges to come in all kinds of cities." Back in 1975 Tacoma followed the lead of Seattle in passing a law requiring 1 percent of its construction budget to be spent on public art. In the early 70's champions of public art urged civic leaders across the country to adopt such measures as a way of stimulating civic character. Many city councils bought the argument and succeeded in littering our cities, parks, and highways with unsightly "modern" sculptures and murals produced by tax-subsidized "artists"—the cultural equivalent of WPA.

But now Tacoma has become "the first local government in the country to overturn, by popular initiative, a one-percent-for-art ordinance." They had taken it for 10 years, but a wild 12-by-96 neon "light sculpture" in pink, red, blue, and green designed by Stephen Antonakos for the city's new sports center apparently had the residents seeing only one color—red. The $272,000 would have bought an awful lot of modeling clay and finger paints for the kindergartners—better art, too.

The divisions in the American right began to look like volcanic fissures at this spring's Philadelphia Society meeting held in Chicago. The old right charge against the neoconservatives was led by Paul Gottfried and Stephen Tonsor. Gottfried, who has recently joined the editorial staff of *The World and I*, made a serious and well-documented case for not papering over important differences between paleo- and neoconservatives. The major bone of contention is the whole array of New Deal policies which, he argued, conservatives reject and neoconservatives accept with only minor reservations. Tonsor, professor emeritus at Michigan, mounted a stunning and quite unexpected rhetorical attack on non-Christians and ex-Marxists who call themselves conservatives.

Questions and responses from attending neocons and supporters highlighted the breach. Arnold Beichman, both at the meeting and in a later *Washington Times* editorial, warned against the dangers of sectarian disputes and defended the contributions to conservative thought made by ex-Marxists. He went on to say that conservatism was nothing more than a political coalition held together by anticommunism. Later in the day, Brigitte Berger, William Kristol, and Russell Kirk pointed out that neoconservatism is an umbrella covering a variety of opinions, some of which are genuinely conservative. Kirk made an appeal for a united front—especially against the libertarians—and made a few apposite remarks on the morals and education of journalists. The younger Kristol made one of the most telling criticisms of the entire event when he wondered, out loud, why the debate had not centered on some substantial issue rather than on something so hazy as the conservative identity.

With friends and allies in both camps, it is hard to utter an opinion without causing pain, but the subject is important enough to require one or two observations. First, Paul Gottfried's arguments cannot simply be dismissed. There *are* significant differences between the two camps; there *has* been a tendency among some neocons to take credit for reinventing the wheel. Anglo-American conservatives can claim a richer intellectual and literary tradition than the reformed liberalism advocated by many of those who sail under the neoconservative flag. It is high time for more recently arrived conservatives to

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dig into the essays of Irving Babbitt, Richard Weaver, T.S. Eliot, and Russell Kirk before presuming to speak for "conservatism."

On the other side, it must be conceded that the neocons do a much more credible job of analyzing policy issues with the tools of the social sciences. They do not disguise their interest in politics and administration, and, quite frankly, they have demonstrated their aptitude for it—an aspect of the case brought out well by Leslie Lenkowski. What is more, they are not doing battle with Richard Weaver and Russell Kirk but with those who quote Weaver and Kirk, and therein lies an important difference. The old right has fallen on evil days. With the exception of senior men like M.E. Bradford and George Panichas, there are few distinguished scholars or men-of-letters among them. It was Paul Gottfried who pointed to at least one of the reasons: bright young conservatives have increasingly abandoned the life of the mind and turned their attention to politics or political journalism. If they are less successful than the Johnny-come-latelies, that is a reason for sour grapes, but hardly the sort of high moral ground that is sometimes claimed.

From a seat in the audience, it appeared that the most serious contributions to the debate were made by Gottfried, Kristol, and Mrs. Berger, all of whom—by and large—talked about issues rather than labels. It is a conversation that—however disagreeable—ought to continue. If conservatives are really held together by anticommunism alone, then they may as well make common cause with Muammar Qaddafi, Lyndon LaRouche, and Meyer Kahane. If there is no basis for a conservative dialogue—as some have suggested—then how shall we explain that the most distinguished old right social philosopher, Robert Nisbet, regularly writes for neoconservative journals? Nisbet's combination of high principle, superb scholarship, and freedom from cant is an example worth emulating. (TF)

Prayer in a closet may no longer be an option, at least wherever two or three are gathered together. A Colorado district court recently fined a minister $12,500 and ordered him to serve 80 hours of community service for holding prayer services and Bible study classes in the basement of his home. Most of the neighbors saw no problem, but when a few objected to the extra cars on the street and to the noisy kids showing up in the neighborhood, a zoning restriction on "religious activity" was invoked by the courts. For ignoring the court's zoning ruling, the Rev. Richard Blanche has been cited for contempt of court. Blanche's lawyer told *Religious Freedom Alert* that his client "could have had the same number of people over to watch Denver Bronco games on Sundays and nothing in the code would have stopped that."

But the *Alert* reports that the Christian Legal Society has encountered such zoning problems "all over," with cases in Florida and New Jersey reaching the appellate or state supreme courts. In Rockford, Illinois, the Family Christian Fellowship was recently fined $1,000 ($500 for the congregation; $500 for the pastor) for violating the zoning laws by holding services on property that could legally be used for holding street carnivals but not for worship. The Rockford zoning ordinance is so antichurch that liquor stores and junkyards are easier to establish than a church. After a long legal fight, the Family Christian Fellowship may persuade the county board to change the zoning code. But the problem illustrates the meddlesome silliness of bureaucratic government at all levels: in many cities now you can't burn leaves, assemble for prayers, and—before long—let your cat out for the night without a special permit. They are so busy coercing, regulating, and licensing law-abiding citizens, it's small wonder they do so little about organized crime.

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles*:

The Spiral Staircase

"Do Darwinists point to the prime significance of reproductive success? They might quote Genesis: Be fruitful and multiply. For the Darwinists' emphasis on competition and strife, we have the entire Old Testament—beginning with the story of Cain and Abel—to illustrate the human propensity for strife. On point after point—from sexual differences to social order—Darwinists (especially sociobiologists) have been providing ammunition for the almost-empty cartridge belts of Christian apologetics. While most Darwinists mistakenly regard the Christian view of man as too static and rigid to have anything in common with a science based on evolution, in fact Christianity is a remarkably dynamic faith that has consistently held out the promise of improvement. . . . To put the matter as plainly as I can, an atheist Darwinist *sometimes* serves the faith more effectively than a convention of deacons or a convocation of bishops (or is that a tautology?)."

—from "Journalists and Other Anthropoids"
by Thomas Fleming

ALSO

E.O. Wilson examines the fallacies of determinism

Stanley Jaki traces the horror of modern times back to Darwin

Paul Hollander looks at the continuing attraction of socialism

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FRUITLESS GRAIN *by Thomas Fleming*

The great American story for at least 100 years has been a tale like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* or Hawthorne's "My Kinsman Major Molineux": the rube who comes to the city and loses his innocence. Like Jack in the fairy tale, we are eager to trade in the family cow for a chance to get fabulous wealth. The change from an essentially rural way of life to urbanity has had enormous consequences, not least of all on our literary taste. In simpler times, Xenophon was a popular author. Along with Plutarch's *Lives*, the Bible, and a set of the Waverly Novels, you could not escape seeing copies of the *Anabasis* or the *Cyropedia* on the shelves of comfortable country houses.

Xenophon would have been pleased with his rustic success. Of all serious writers, ancient and modern, he was the most devoted to rural life. He not only wrote more earnestly about hunting than either Trollope or the creator of Jorrocks but also composed a major work on the problems of managing a country household. In that work, the *Oeconomicus*, he records a conversation between the younger Cyrus (whose attempt to win the Persian throne made a soldier out of Xenophon) and the great Spartan general Lysander. When Lysander complimented the prince on his gardens, Cyrus insisted that he had planted them himself and added:

> Whenever I am well, I never dine before I have worked up a sweat either in military exercises or farm labor.

We are not all so rich as Cyrus, a son of the Great King of Persia, but in the 20th century it generally costs money to work up a sweat. The price of running shoes and health club membership alone could clothe a farm family for a year, but the rich city-dweller will pay almost any price to enter the new elect of the almost-young and healthy—the living dead of runners and workout artists, whose body movements are controlled by something less complicated than a brain.

For a sweat that only the very rich can afford, consider buying a farm from a family facing foreclosure. By all accounts we may be the last generation to understand the phrase "family farm." Most of the talk about saving the farm concentrates on the marketplace: What do we owe the farmers who feed us? Defenders of the family farm insist that massive farm programs are necessary if we are going to feed ourselves, that individual farmers are an essential to our economy.

I wish it were all true, but some form of agribusiness took over food production in the earlier mercantile empires of

Rome and Byzantium. We are experiencing the same destruction of the yeoman class, and our civilization is already beginning to feel the consequences. I do not mean the loss of simpler manners and morals we associate with rural people. Much of that simplicity is now a convenient fiction—perhaps it always was. After spending a good part of my life in or near the country, I cannot honestly declare that country folks can routinely be expected to display better morals. They do have less time and energy (to say nothing of money) to cheat at cards or marriage; most of them have a better-developed sense of right and wrong—or at least of consequences: forget to milk the cows and you have problems. But, in the end, farmers are nothing more than run-of-the mill sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. It would be a mistake to expect too much of them.

But in a larger sense, farmers have laid the foundations for our civilization. The American Revolution was fought, after all, by farmers mostly, not by the lawyers, politicians, and service industry personnel who seem to set the tone these days. The United States remained an essentially rural and small-town society well into the 20th century. What else explains the peculiar moralism and religiousness which has been commented on so often? There is no point in referring to the Puritans, who were never a very large part of

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the population. Southern Baptists, Germans in Missouri, Norwegians in Wisconsin all came from quite different societies, but they shared a set of commitments—principles would be too strong an expression—to their family, their church, to a way of life that can only be described as agrarian. Now most of their children can sing (with Hank Williams):

I left my home out on the rural route
I told my pa that I was stepping out
To get the honky tonk blues . . .
Oh Lord, I got 'em, I got the honky tonk blues.

Even with wealth and fame, Williams could never quite heal the breach he had opened when he left the land to go out honky-tonking. He died in his Cadillac, full of pain pills and liquor, divorced from the impossible woman he loved—a myth for modern man.

The conventional answer was given by Henry Mencken in response to the Southern agrarians. Farmers were turning into proletarians and "the sooner the change is effected, the better." But it is fair to ask if there was ever a civilization that was *not* fundamentally agrarian in its best days. The average Athenian citizen in the age of Pericles lived in town but got up early and walked out to his farm. The most exemplary Roman hero was Cincinnatus, who (like General Washington) returned to his farm after saving his country from an invading army. Even in the urbane age of the Antonines, the gentleman farmer remained the Roman ideal. Pliny's letters reveal a way of life—a mixture of literature, public service, and farming—that would have pleased both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams—both of them farmers down to their dirty fingernails.

Even England remained doggedly country at the height of her mercantile glory. A man might make his money in trade, but he was expected to buy a place in the country and acquire the manners of a gentleman. The reality of England was "a nation of shopkeepers," but the ideal lay somewhere between Squire Western and Squire Allworthy.

What happens to a culture that becomes thoroughly urban? Athens became a university town; Rome—already in Pliny's time—was described by Juvenal as a sewer (it has never been thoroughly drained); and England—well, even a kind man has trouble saying nice things about the old sod—a living museum with an immigration problem. Whether we like it or not, ours is the greatest civilization on the face of the earth these days. We may not be, in Berkeley's phrase, "time's fairest children," and I pray we are not the last, but if Athens was an education for Greece, the American way of life has set the standard for modern times, and that way of life has been, until very recently, more deeply rooted in the soil than almost any country in the civilized world.

Even in the city, Americans cannot entirely shake off the manure from our running shoes. Living in the Midwest, I am appalled by the amount of time my neighbors spend mowing their lawns, raking leaves, and clipping hedges. "Don't they have anything better to do?" is my guilt-ridden response. The results are rarely happy—sterile clipped lawns, as neat as astroturf and almost as life-like. But the aesthetic poverty makes their devotion all the more remarkable.

It is possible to see the whole suburban project of postwar America as an effort to combine urban affluence with a more rural way of life. Spacious lawns with room for a bit of a garden—on curving streets with names like Appletree Lane—were designed to convey the feeling of a rustic village. In many cases, the comparison is ludicrous, but in some older suburban communities, life *was* pleasant. Children could roam the streets in safety, play baseball at the playground; parents arranged cookouts and pool parties. Even now, when commuting is made more difficult by two-income families, the suburbs continue to attract more residents than they are losing.

It is easy to mock what T.S. Eliot described as: "decent godless people: / Their only monument the asphalt road / And a thousand lost golf balls." But we should recall C.S. Lewis' response: that ordinary working people have a natural desire to create the sort of decent life that is virtually impossible in the cities where they work. How can we make fun of their struggle to live well, especially on aesthetic grounds?

A trip to the hardware store in spring can be an exhilarating experience. Paunchy middle-aged men are lined up with sacks of seed and fertilizer; others are checking out the latest model lawn and garden tractor. The excitement of combat against cutworms and caterpillars is mixed with the air of expectancy that usually surrounds the last weeks of pregnancy. There must be some deep compulsion to get our fingers dirty and to plant little fields of fruitless grain, wherever we find ourselves. Edward O. Wilson suggests we are recreating the vistas of our primal past in the African savannas, but Eden was also a garden, so we are told, and ever since the fall man has expended great efforts to restore that lost world of unfallen nature.

Even before we hunted, men and women had learned to gather fruits and grasses, to grub in the dirt for succulent tubers. Rooting and grubbing are as much a part of our nature as pairing off and raising families. Urban civilization subjects both impulses—agrarian and familial—to serious strains. We turn away from parental responsibilities and indulge our taste for the bizarre and unnatural or—and this is hardly any better than perversion—we pursue a career of erotic adventurism. Like spoiled boys who refuse to give up marbles and go to school, we nurse our adolescence into old age and become first evil and then ridiculous.

Even in the city, Americans cannot entirely shake off the manure from our running shoes.

Human nature is resilient, but not infinitely so. Culture requires cultivation, tending—tilling and weeding—even more than a field of corn. We are capable, as a species, of almost limitless advances, so long as we get the basics right. But uprooted from the soil, we are like the giant Antaeus, whom Hercules could destroy only by lifting up, tearing him loose from the earth that gave him strength. Almost 60 years ago a number of poets and scholars in the American South published a jeremiad, *I'll Take My Stand*, warning against the perils of a rootless, industrialized society. The criticisms of Andrew Lytle, Allen Tate, and John Crowe

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Ransom have been expanded upon by such diverse writers as Jacques Ellul, Richard Weaver, and Wendell Berry. But in the declining years of the 20th century, it seems less likely than ever that Western man will have the wits to reclaim his inheritance.

We have invested so much of our self-esteem into the material signs of progress that we cannot heed the evidence of our own hearts. If we are so satisfied with the works of our hands, why do we spend the happiest part of the year on vacation, getting away from a world that has only one face to show us—our own? But however tired we grow of all this civility—the solitude of one species talking to itself—we cannot admit that the very wealth of creation reflects in some way the abundance of nature's God. We systematically destroy the habitats of countless wild creatures, but our loneliness compels us to take birds and beasts into our houses and give them endearing names. The man who lives only for his month in the Maine woods or trout fishing in the Rockies will sneer at the suggestion that there is something wrong with a country he has helped to make so unlovely.

It is fashionable for Conservatives to dislike the Romantics, especially those who have read Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism*. Romantic poets like Scott and Wordsworth had at least one great lesson to teach the men of the Enlightenment: reason and science were not the bread of life. We may smile at Wordsworth for pretending to believe:

> One impulse in a vernal wood
> May tell you more of man
> Of moral evil and of good
> Than all the sages can.

But if nature cannot be your teacher, what can? The Old Testament sees God in a burning bush and upon the waters. Will we see Him in a nuclear reactor? C.S. Lewis (in *Pilgrim's Regress*) made the case for romanticism as a necessary stepping stone back from modernism. By "worshiping" nature, we will, at least, escape the idolatrous adoration of the machines we have created with our own hands.

The agrarian dream was unquestionably a lost cause even in the 1930's, but the vision that lay behind the dream is part of a perennial wisdom, a wisdom that recognizes that man cannot be happy estranged from himself. If we consider man only as we know him now, Homo americanus 1986, we must acknowledge that gardening remains his most common hobby, that hunting and fishing are among his favorite sports—to say nothing of camping, hiking, and bird-watching. It is scarcely utopian to suggest that we confront this fact of life head-on and recognize that even we retain some elements of pre-lapsarian man.

"Cultiver notre jardin" was Candide's conclusion after surveying the follies of the human race. That may be the best possible advice in this not quite the best of all possible worlds. Gardening compels a man to reground himself in the endless rhythms of the seasons and the cycles of flood and drought. Nine to five the old man wears a suit and sits in an office taking calls and dictating memos. His children, dragooned into working beside him, catch a glimpse of the primeval father. How can a son grow up to accept responsibility, to know what it is to be a man, if he never learns to share in productive work at his father's side? How will a daughter learn to tell a real man from the look-alikes being turned out of colleges and MBA programs every year? But if, when father comes home, he reassumes some of his ancient dignity by grubbing arsy-versy in the garden, his children may learn to regard him as something more than a grunt and a checkbook.

It is increasingly difficult for children to grow up in a fragmented society. Their time is divided between home, school, clubs, lessons, between the sense of reality they acquire at home and the fictions they hear in school. Neither gardening nor rural sports can put all the pieces together, but they can provide the setting for families to live, for a change, as families.

Is that the remedy for every social ill—a 20' by 20' garden plot? Hardly, but it is preferable to the inevitable alternatives. Modern man, being what he is, will search for political solutions to the problems he has created. We already hear the cries for more research, new programs, bills that must be passed if we are to save the family or prevent teenage suicide. Hire more counselors, arts administrators—all right, even horticultural consultants—to support the family. This is the grand illusion of our time: that what men and women cannot do for themselves, either individually or acting through natural communities, other men and women—far away from the problem—can. As Andrew Lytle has said more than once, "The opposite of love is not hatred. It is the addiction to power."

The gardener builds up a partial immunity to the drug. He learns to love his own bit of land more than the rest of the world put together. To that extent, he is more inclined to pay attention to his own affairs. He loves his own land—his plot, his neighborhood, his country—too well to be seduced by any ideology. Rural America was isolationist—sometimes dangerously so—and cheered Calvin Coolidge's answer to a wise guy who wanted to know what he did with his time: "I minded my own business." What will become of this rural nation now that we have turned over its governance to the residents of the dullest imperial capital since Hattusas? I think we know.

The gardener also learns, sometimes painfully, the limits to his own power. Karel Čapek summed up the gardener's political creed in his remarkable little book, *The Gardener's Year*, published only a year before *I'll Take My Stand!*:

> A man who has a little garden inevitably becomes a private proprietor; then not any rose grows in it, but his rose; then he does not see, or say, that the cherries are already in flower, but that his cherries are already in bloom. A man who is a proprietor enters into a certain kind of relationship with his neighbors; for instance, as regards the weather, he says, "*We* ought not to have more rain," or that "*We* have had a nice shower." . . . But it is equally true that it awakens frightfully strong selfish instincts of private enterprise and property. There is no doubt that a man would go to fight for his faith, but still more willingly and fiercely would he fight for his little garden. The man who is the owner of some yards of land, and is growing something on it,

(continued on page 21)

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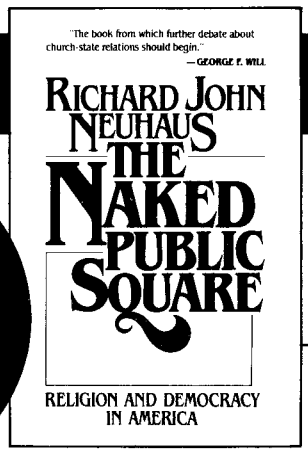
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THE POET AND THE PLOWMAN *by Fred Chappell*

Surprisingly often we talked about Vergil, usually about the *Aeneid*, but sometimes about the *Georgics*, and then with the wry sentimental fondness of old students who had been made, not quite willingly, to go to school to the poem. And during the plentiful longueurs of the Redskin games of the mid-1960's, we would regret that so many traditional attractions of farm life had seemed to disappear along with our Latin. Then he would smile and say in his breathy ironic genteel Kentucky accent: "But we would make dreadful farmers, Fred, you and I."

This was Allen Tate, who would spend Sunday afternoons at my home during his two-week teaching stints in Greensboro because I enjoyed watching television football with him. ("I admire the precision," he said. "Machine-like.") He maintained that poets should be only spectator farmers—doubting that Vergil had ever struck a lick with a hoe—and that when they became active husbandmen, they cut ridiculous figures or were unhappy and embittered. He was thinking of Jesse Stuart and Robert Frost and of Hesiod, and I thought of the bittersweet work of Wendell Berry.

It was partly because of his allegiance to the values of an agricultural society that he liked to describe himself as a "reactionary." That was rather a belligerent term in the 1960's (and must have been more so in the 1930's when he developed his stance), and I was puzzled by it. Later I came to understand that for Mr. Tate, it meant something like "radical conservative," and that he was pleased to align himself with Poe and John C. Calhoun equally. The more thoughtful attitudes are the harder to define, and his usage of "reactionary" was both ironic and earnest at the same time.

The ageless relationship between poetry and farming probably has always been sentimental and ironic; the two disciplines would seem to have mostly accidental requirements in common: patience, fatalism, renunciation, awe of nature, reverence for the earth. When we remind ourselves that our word *verse* came originally from *versus*, turning the plow at the end of a furrow, we must wonder what strange terrain the contemporary poet is tilling with his wildly staggered furrows. When we think of the small farmer supporting his agriculture by means of another job in factory or town, perhaps we think of all the American poets perched at insecure university posts. Othello's occupation is not gone, not in our century; but Cincinnatus' is—and maybe Vergil's also.

It has never been possible to say where the poet fits in the basic economies of nations, but it has always been clear that the farmer lodges at the bottom, as the necessary and unchangeable foundation. The position may be necessary, but it is not glamorous. Scholars have faithfully diminished the old legend about the *Georgics*, that the poem was written at the suggestion of Augustus in order to lure farmer-soldiers back to the land after they had acquired a taste for plunder, luxury, and urbanity. ("How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree?") But the legend did account for the double nature of the poem which, while it celebrates the grandeur of the land and the hieratic ceremoniousness of farm work, does not stint in pointing out the difficulties and dangers. The poet is careful to draw in the disasters of flood, fire, drought, frost, and crop failure; whoever they were, his intended audience was not naive.

On one side, then, the poem is acceptably realistic, but Vergil is also at pains to show that he stands at some distance from his subject, that his poem is a bookish poem. He pays direct tribute to some of his sources; Aristaeus, Hesiod, Cato the Elder, Aristotle. If the celebratory aspect

Fred Chappell's most recent book is The Source *(Lousiana State University Press).*

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of the poem is always brightened by a deliberate and artificial appeal to the myth of the Golden Age, the didactic passages are carefully informed by the best scientific knowledge of the time.

But that may have been a necessary mistake. Nothing quaintifies so quickly as scientific knowledge, and our century, which has deceived itself into believing that it actually knows something about nature, may look upon the *Georgics* as no more than a curious compilation of ancient error. There are, for example, the long famous passages about bee society in which Vergil describes the control of the hive under the King Bee and gives an account of the spontaneous generation of the insect. My own copy of the *Georgics* is an 1816 reprint of the 1740 edition by John Martyn, then professor of botany at Cambridge, who differs from our contemporary scientists in his anxiety to vindicate Vergil rather than to refute him. When he must correct rather than support the information, he displays a pleasing diffidence: "The Poet's account of the generation of bees is by no means consistent with the doctrine of the modern philosophers, who assert with great probability, that no animal, or even plant, is produced without a concurrence of the two sexes. However, the doctrine of equivocal generation was so generally admitted by the ancients, that it is no wonder our Poet should assent to it." (Martyn's phrase, "or even plant," probably shows that he has but lately accepted the ideas of Linnaeus.) And on the matter of the King: "But the modern philosophers have been more happy in discovering the nature of these wonderful insects. The labouring bees do not appear to be of either sex; the drones are discovered to have the male organs of generation; and the king is found to be of the female sex."

But our 20th-century scientists love pecking orders; they have arranged an inflexible one among their own disciplines, with particle physics at the top and sociology or maybe economics at the bottom. If they were asked to rank the poet as a purveyor of reliable knowledge, they might place him somewhere below a computer software salesman and only slightly above a political candidate. It was this sort of arrogance that most rankled John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, and they took up arms to defend poetry against it. Mr. Tate was very proud of his definition of poetry as *knowledge carried to the heart*, and on the several occasions when he quoted it to me, he underlined it with a significant glance.

That is a nifty and telling phrase, but it does not answer all objections. Can every sort of knowledge be fashioned into poetry and given such memorable emotional force that it is carried to the heart? T.S. Eliot denied the possibility of a modern counterpart to the *Georgics*, declaring informational didactic poetry dead as a form. But Eliot's dictum probably points up a fact the contemporary poet does not like to admit, that for all its vaunted toughness, modern poetry simply cannot accommodate such masses of obvious and irreplaceable information as we find in Vergil's lines. Even the current preoccupation with brutality and despair is only a symptom of preciosity. A poetry which can no longer rejoice in daily homely labor, which cannot—in Vergil's phrase—honor the plow, will never be convincing in its continual wheedling about political injustice.

Nudus ara, sere nudus. "Plow naked, naked sow," Vergil tells us. The scientist will surely find this bit of advice characteristically silly, but the elder farmers I remember from my youth would know instinctively what it means—and Vance Randolph reports the practice carried on to the letter in remote spots in Arkansas even in the 1930's. The words are there to remind us of the ceremonial, and ultimately religious, nature of farming; they remind us of the selfless rituals we must undergo in order to keep faith.

On the subject of this faith I could never do better than to quote John S. Collis on the potato:

> When we eat a potato we eat the earth, and we eat the sky. It is the law of nature that all things are all things. That which does not appear to exist to-day is to-morrow hewn down and cast into the oven. Nature carries on by taking in her own washing. That is Nature's economy, contrary to political economy; so that he who cries "Wolf! Wolf!" is numbered amongst the infidels. . . . What is an infidel? One who lacks faith. What creates faith? A miracle. How then can there be a faithless man found in the world? Because many men have cut off the nervous communication between the eye and the brain. In the madness of blindness they are at the mercy of intellectual nay-sayers, theorists, theologians, and other enemies of God. But it doesn't matter; in spite of them, faith is reborn when anyone chooses to take a good look at anything—even a potato.

This passage is from Collis' *The Worm Forgives the Plough*; his best book, *While Following the Plough*, is perhaps also the best—though unintended—commentary on the *Georgics*. It has been out of print for exactly 40 years.

But the question becomes, would our poets understand Vergil's advice to plow and sow naked? The largest purpose of the *Georgics* is not to dignify, but to sanctify, honest farm labor. A reader who has not looked at it in a long time finds he has forgotten that the poem is full of stars. Even the smallest task must be undertaken in due season under the proper constellations. These prescriptions are not mere meteorology; they connect the order of the earth to the order of the stars. The farmer moves by the motion of the stars, and his labors determine the concerns of the government. The Roman State is not founded upon the soil, it is founded in the universe. And so were all the other civilizations which managed to endure for any length of time. If poets do not wish to study these matters and treat of them, they shirk their responsibilities and fail their society.

Yet I suppose that if a contemporary poet does not feel this responsibility, then it is not his. It is all too easy to sit in a self-appointed judgment seat and allocate responsibilities to one's fellows. The impulse to do so may even proceed from Vergil, who had a very acute sense of responsibility. The *Georgics* and the *Aeneid* were his duties rather than his pleasures. An honorable tradition makes poetry secondary in his affections; he had more love of philosophy, and the passage of the second Georgic in which he speaks of his Lucretian ambitions is truly poignant:

(continued on the following page)

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And may the lovely Muses first of all
(Whose priest I am, love-struck by poetry)
Accept me; show me the roads of heaven, the stars,
The various solar eclipses, works of the moon,
Earthquakes, what forces make the high seas
Swell and ruin the shores and once again
Fall back, and why the suns of winter hasten
To dive into the ocean, or what delay
Obstructs the winter nights that move so slowly.
But if my heart's own cooling blood prevents
Attaining to these properties of nature,
Let me love the fields and valley streams,
The unassuming woods and rivers. The meadows,
Sperchius, Taygetus where the Spartan virgins
Dance: there, or in the cool vale under Haemus,
Let someone place me in broad shade of branches.
That man was happy who could know the causes
Of things and under his feet could trample fear,
Unyielding fate, and the roar of greedy Acheron.

And there is a sense in which he has overfulfilled his responsibilities. It is credible from our perspective to find the largest fault of his rural poem in its enormous influence. The *Georgics* is the wishful cornerstone of the Jeffersonian utopia, a nation of small landholders. If the poem contains enough realistic detail to be convincing, it is still a fairy tale at heart. There is no mention of slave labor in the *Georgics*, nor even of hired labor. The farmer is enjoined to be content with a modest farm that will just support his family. But three bad years in a row, or precipitous debtorship, will make beggars of this family. We read now with special sadness the lines in which security is named as the chief comfort of the farmer's life:

The farmer divides the earth with crooked plow;
This the year's whole labor: thus he sustains
His little family and his fatherland,
His herd of cows and his blue ribbon bulls.

"Perhaps it may still be possible," we think, forgetting that Vergil places this idyllic picture in the mythic past, under the reign of aureus Saturnus, golden Saturn, before iron Jupiter seized the scepter.

Probably the poet was never the substantial friend the farmer was looking for. Still he has proved a better friend than the scientist and the government expert. He has generally shown admiration rather than contempt for the farmer's personal capacities, and if his advice has not always been useful, at least it has not been deadly.

Mr. Tate was right, of course. Most poets would make better lutenists than farmers. But even the most inept of us still feel close kinship with the man in the fields, with his life of ordered observation and inspired patience. That is the one life besides poetry and natural philosophy that still touches an essential harmony of things, and when a civilization discards that way of life, it breaks the most fundamental covenant mankind can remember.

REVISIONS

The Boy From Oak Park

We remember Ernest Hemingway chiefly as a figure in his own fiction—a newspaperman in Europe, an habitué of Parisian cafés, an aficionado of Spanish bullfighting, a big-game hunter on the African veldt, an American in World War I and the Spanish Civil War. In *The Young Hemingway* (New York: Blackwell; $19.95), Michael Reynolds focuses on a different Hemingway, the Hemingway of Oak Park, Illinois, the writer's "first world . . . the one he never wrote about." Although Hemingway eventually moved far from a Middle American perspective in his fiction, Reynolds argues that his personal code grew out of his early experience in the semirural Midwest.

Unlike contemporary Oak Park, now a typical bedroom suburb for Chicago commuters, Oak Park in the early 1900's was "an island on the Illinois prairie. . . . Cows grazed in vacant lots that now have disappeared, and dogs ran freely in summer dusty streets where there were more horses than dogs." Oak Park had already lost much of its country flavor when Hemingway returned in 1919 from his service with the Red Cross in Italy during World War I: The Oak Park police became motorized in 1911, and the village fathers banned chickens in 1913. Fortunately, there remained the Hemingway summerhouse in Horton Bay, Michigan, looking out over Lake Walloon to the Hemingways' Longfield Farm. In an engaging narrative style, Reynolds takes a close look at the two summers Hemingway spent at Horton Bay after his World War I service. The experiences that inspired the Nick Adams stories date back to this period. More importantly, a series of sketches of Horton Bay residents that Hemingway began in 1919 eventually provided the basis for *In Our Time* (1924), Hemingway's first notable literary success. Reynolds locates these early Horton Bay sketches in the same "small town" tradition as the work of Hamlin Garland and Edgar Lee Masters.

Neither Oak Park nor Horton Bay was a scene of familial concord for the Hemingways, however, and Reynolds does a good job of tracing the young writer's growing estrangement from both of his parents during the postwar years. But then, at least in literary matters, Hemingway thought it possible for a man to "select his own ancestors": In 1920 he chose Conrad as a forebear; a year later he chose Sherwood Anderson. In time, he had constructed a long personal pedigree. Reynolds provides a valuable discussion of Hemingway's first steps up toward the modern literary pantheon. Less useful are the predictable charges of sexist insensitivity and political apathy—one more indication of the ideological rigidity that has straitjacketed the English profession.

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TROJAN ASSES *by Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn*

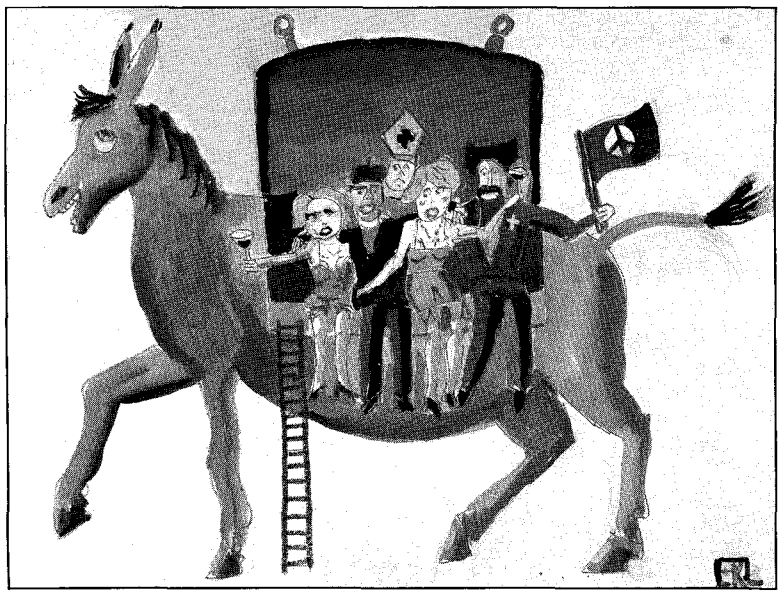
"Then unbelieving Priests reform'd the nation,
And taught more pleasant methods of salvation."
—Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*

On April 22, 1950, I published in the London *Tablet* an article entitled "The American Catholics Revisited," which provoked an avalanche of letters to the editor, wildly protesting against my observations. Nearly all of them came from "God's Own Country." My report did not exactly resound with the ring of a success story; praising and critical passages alternated. Among the weaknesses in the American branch of the Church, I mentioned clericalism, a social imbalance that still creates all sorts of resentments mixed with inferiority complexes, anti-intellectualist undertones, and a morbid worship of "democracy." I also expressed the fear that in a real crisis (a totalitarian dictatorship, for instance) the Church might crack. Lack of space prevented me from mentioning other quite important soft spots. Still, at that time, the Catholic Church in America was, together with that of the Netherlands, an "Exhibit A" of the Church Universal.

Needless to say, the present crisis of the Catholic Church in the United States is intimately related to the crisis in the Church everywhere (yes, everywhere!) but, not so surprisingly, it has a character similar to the earthquake which took place in the Dutch Church—and for analogous reasons. Let us bear in mind that in the 1950's 40 percent of the Dutch professed the Catholic faith; that 45 percent of *all* Dutch children went to Catholic schools; that there existed 21 Catholic dailies, several Catholic radio stations, and a towering university—in other words, an enormous "Establishment." No government could be formed without the Catholic Party (the largest in the country!). There were Catholic Trade Unions, entire closed Catholic neighborhoods, more Dutch priests in the missions than in the homeland, gigantic convents, *five* collections at every Mass, but hardly any Dutch Catholic authors, artists, or world renowned intellectuals. In the South, the Catholics filled all social layers, but in the rest of the Netherlands (as in Holland proper) the Catholics were a new, socially rising element. The department stores in the big cities, more often than not, were in Catholic hands, though a Dutchman once challenged me: "Could you ever imagine a Catholic shipowner?" (This might have changed today.) The Netherlands was the only country where, as an adult, I had the amusing experience of being shouted at by a priest. The crisis which hit the Dutch Catholic Church came as an aftermath of Vatican II. Exactly the same happened in the United States.

Here a word must be said about that Council. It was the highly conservative John XXIII, a staunch advocate of Latin and a devotee of the Rosary, who, after beginning his pontificate as a reactionary, found and took up the plans of Pius XII for an Ecumenic Council. The saintly Papa Giovanni, who prided himself on not being a theologian ("Aren't we both lucky?" he said to an Anglican bishop admitting the same "imperfection"), then organized the Council. And he who reads the decrees of Vatican II will find them very moderate, not in the least revolutionary, sometimes even uninspiring. They did not herald a radical change. If, for instance, one takes article 54 of the Decree on the Holy Liturgy, one will find that it entitles the bishops to permit for cogent reasons the use of the vernacular but commands them to see to it that Latin remains the language of the Church. When I asked an American bishop, who prided himself on being a "Latinist," whether Latin flourishes in his diocese, he answered melancholically: "No. I cannot swim against the stream." Well, has he not been made a bishop to do just that? *Episcopi Angliae semper pavidi* is an old adage, but, I hasten to add: *Non solum Angliae.*

The "trouble with Vatican II" did not come from the decrees but from theologians, from the *periti*, who accompanied and advised bishops, yet had no voice in the Council. Theologians are intellectuals, and intellectuals, as a rule, desperately want to be original. However, sheer originality has specific limits in a Church which is the guardian of God's Revealed Word. Disappointed by the failure of the Council to accept their frequently harebrained notions, these disillusioned *periti* banded together with theologians who had not been invited, and jointly with the enthusiastic aid of the mass media they created a paramagisterium and thus caused (in the words of Eric de Saventhen) a real peritonitis in the Church. Asked where they



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Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn is the European correspondent for National Review *and author most recently of* Gleichheit Oder Freiheit? *(Hohenrain Verlag).*

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found in the Decrees this or that rash assertion, they answered, as a rule, that they could not cite it verbatim, but that it "expressed the spirit of Vatican II." (The same trick has often been played with the "spirit of the Bible.")

The two terms that helped in spreading the Great Confusion globally and locally were "The Opening to the World" and "*Aggiornamento.*" In Italian the latter has two entirely different meanings: to bring up to date *or* to defer, to adjourn. Of course, modes of action always have to be brought up to date in keeping with developments. Thus a transatlantic airliner with propellers is not up-to-date. A jetliner is. And, obviously, one has to talk to people in the language with the vocabulary of the day. Yet God's Revelation expresses eternal verities, and their content cannot be changed. Sometimes they have to be rephrased to be better understood (without corrupting the meaning). As for "The Opening to the World," the New Testament speaks about the *kósmos* or the *aiôn*, the latter having again a double meaning: world and time. And the Scriptures are filled with warnings against the *aiôn* since the Church, after all, is *in*, but not *of* the world. "Do not fall into the same scheme as the *aiôn* [i.e., the world and the spirit of the times]," we can read in Romans 12:2. "The World will hate you," Christ warned his disciples (John 17: 14-16).

Now, it is quite possible and not unimaginable that the Church might become so evil, so degenerate, that the world and the spirit of the times might teach her a lesson. This could have applied in the 10th century, but surely not in the 20th, the most idiotic and savage of all. "We also read Marx and have profited from it," a Papal delegate sent by Paul VI declared solemnly in Cuba, of all places. But one wonders what it was that His Excellency learned from Marx: Anti-Jewish racism? Bad economics? Class hatred? Misogyny? Utter contempt for the working class? "Opening to the World"—not a bad idea, but should the teachings, the insights, the experiences, the customs of the World (we know, after all, who its Prince is!) go into the Church—and not the other way around? The answer given by an important, though not large, sector of the Catholic Church in America to this question is the wrong one. And that this could happen in our age could, *in a way*, have been foreseen a third of a century ago.

First, there was, as in the Netherlands, the danger that the letter might kill the spirit. Unlike the Church in Europe, the Church in America defined its laws of conduct rigorously and insisted that they be severely kept. All too often these bylaws were stressed rather than the natural virtues. I vividly remember a sermon in which a priest seriously debated whether dislodging and swallowing a tiny piece of meat while brushing one's teeth on Friday morning constituted a violation of the Friday abstinence. And could one then have the temerity to receive Holy Communion? In my younger years I used to work until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, and before retiring, in order to sleep well, I drank a glass of water. The following day, if it was a Sunday, I went to Holy Communion. I told this to an American monsignor who nearly fainted: midnight was the limit and only a few minutes could perhaps be added for the exact astronomical time. If, however, I lived in Indiana on the borders of Illinois, I could rush over to Illinois (on CST), eat quickly a two-inch Porterhouse steak before 1:00 A.M. (EST), and receive Holy Communion with a good conscience in Indiana. This Talmudic decision reminded me of pious Jews who, on a Sabbath, could only travel "On Water" and therefore sat on a bottle of water during a train journey. This I saw in the good old days in Poland. The exhortation of Jesus that the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath had no significance for them. Certain American Catholics fit in a similar category.

The pre-Conciliar American Church did not strike me as particularly spiritual. When I once asked the priestly librarian of a Catholic college for *The Dark Night* of St. John of the Cross, he seemed a bit lost. "Of the Cross?" "Yes, the friend and confessor of Saint Teresa of Avila, the great mystic." "Certainly not! Mysticism? We don't go in for that! Here we educate healthy American boys!" (Therefore, let us not be surprised that the "Exhibit A" had not yet produced a canonized native-born American Saint.)

American Catholics were overly keen to prove to all and sundry that they were "not different from the rest": hence also their enthusiasm in dropping a language as outlandish as Latin in their ritual, their joy in shedding countless characteristics which in one way or another distinguished them from the rest of their fellow citizens.

And yet, under this crust of literalism, often mixed with real magic superstition, there burned an unholy, desperate longing to be accepted by the big, wide, progressive, waspish, intellectual, "liberal," enlightened world. There was, no doubt, a sociological aspect to this nostalgia, but it certainly does not explain the entire story of the crisis. The "sociological" element has European roots and also has to do with the immigration, the late arrival of Catholics in the United States—if we except Maryland and the Southwest. The settlement of the Pilgrim Fathers was dramatic and had a heroic flavor. When the Irish came during the potato famine, they arrived, as eyewitnesses told us, in rags, covered with sores, tortured by vermin, swinging the shillelagh. The only fully literate among them were the priests. Their rise was difficult and steeply uphill, and their Church was highly clerical.

Clericalism characterizes all decapitated societies in which the clergy has to assume the role of both the First and the Second Estate—not only in Ireland, but also in Slovenia and Slovakia. (Needless to say, clericalism never existed in Spain, Italy, Belgium, Poland, or Bavaria.) This also explains why the Catholic Church of America unavoidably had an Irish, not an Italian or Polish, leadership. (With great efforts the Germans managed to take second place in the hierarchy.) This also accounts for the fact that the Catholic Church in America had an aristophobic character, politically to the left of center: there was the resentment of the Irish farmer, the Irish worker against the Anglo-Irish "Protestant" upper crust who had exploited and repressed him. No wonder that the Catholics (the Irish and, later, South and East European immigrants forming the working class) voted "Democratic" and why pure democracy—an alien, un-American, French importation, feared and loathed by the Founding Fathers—was methodi-

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cally extolled in Catholic education. This political doctrine, sooner or later, was bound to have its effect on the outlook of the Catholic Church in America.

Alexandre Vinet, the Reformed Swiss theologian, warned us ages ago that in a synthesis of Christianity and democracy, the latter would finally devour the former. Little was it realized that, psychologically, there yawned an abyss between the patriarchal Catholic outlook and the "democratism" dominating the lower American scene. The louder American "Protestants" voiced their suspicion that all Catholics must be royalists at heart and that the Catholic Church was really a monarchy, the more frantically many American Catholics emphasized their boundless veneration for democracy—partly in order to prove their so frequently doubted loyalty to America.

As we can see, American Catholics—*qua* Americans—often had chips on their shoulders. They were considered immoral, and thus they asserted their Jansenistic puritanism; they were called illiterate, and thus they established many more schools than any other religious community; they were suspected to be unassimilable aliens, and thus they protested their patriotism; they had arrived as penniless paupers, and thus they climbed as a group economically higher than any other group (if sociological data gathered by the University of Chicago is correct). American Catholics were overly keen to prove to all and sundry that they were "not different from the rest": hence also their enthusiasm in dropping a language as outlandish as Latin in their ritual, their delight at no longer being called "fisheaters," their joy in shedding countless characteristics which in one way or another distinguished them from the rest of their fellow citizens. Universities formerly well-known as "Catholic" have made great strides in that direction. It might be argued that such schools removed crucifixes from classrooms in order to get Federal aid, but this is not the only explanation. (I know of a Catholic institute of higher learning where a brilliant, internationally famous scholar received no appointment because an administrator considered him to be "too Catholic.") The alacrity shown by nuns in shedding their religious garb, the issuing of religious textbooks which carefully avoid the supranatural, the eagerness in transforming their Church into some sort of organization for mere social services, to make her appear like an unprincipled association of harmless do-gooders, all point in that direction.

True, there was a crisis everywhere after Vatican II, but in the Netherlands and, even more so, in the United States it assumed a specific character. The symptoms had *always* been there: a lot, in addition, was sheer reaction. A national flag next to the altar? (I would not tolerate this in our local church, but today certain American bishops seem to be ready to offer their country to the Soviets on a platter.) Lacking in America was the characteristic anticlericalism of the Catholic World, but it always lurked well-hidden in the background. A young priest in Austria, obviously, would not dare to call a gray-haired lady by her first name. I have heard American mothers calling their own priestly son "Father," a form of address reserved with us for members of religious orders only. In Poland, it is "Mr. Priest."

Pastors with the humility of St. Jean Vianney, the *Curé d'Ars*, did not abound in America. The lay editor of the diocesan weekly would kowtow before the old monsignor who really ran the show: the lay professor in Catholic colleges would tremble before his clerical superior. Now, in a way, this has come to an end, and in a way it has not. In the old days the people, by and large, were near to their priests, the grumbling of certain intellectuals (good and bad ones) notwithstanding. Now there is, interestingly enough, a gap between them. The crisis descended from the top, yet the people were more steadfast than their clerical leaders. Many of them no longer are respected. Some of the bishops have become *bombinantes in vacuo*.

I think that there must have been something wrong about the education of American priests. Once the director of a seminary, looking over a group of his students, said to me sadly: "All mechanics with Roman collars." Scholasticism alone dominated the scene, the leading theological periodicals were called *New Scholasticism*, *The Thomist*, *The Modern Schoolman*. Roman precepts were meticulously obeyed, but there was always an undercurrent of resentment against the "Italian" capital. The narrowness was often unbelievable and a weekly like *Commonweal* once had a truly important part to play. ("Officially" it was not Catholic and thus could boast of having no "moderator.") There was the *Legion of Decency* which could have had a constructive influence but came to the most incredible decisions and coaxed the faithful into obedience to their often ludicrous judgments. The Legion banned some of the best French films, like *La femme du Boulanger* or *Regain*, not because they were French (and hence obviously immoral), but because they featured "illicit love."

Among the American bishops there were only few of real eminence; they were rarely scholars or saints but primarily administrators. A brilliant man like Bishop Wright of Pittsburgh (later Roman Cardinal and head of all secular priests), a genuine conservative, was a rare exception. Cardinal Spellman was perhaps neither a saint nor a scholar but an excellent organizer and, at least, a man of principles and a patriot. But the average? I once asked an urbane bishop in the Middle West what would be the chances for a man of Boston Brahmin stock, an exceptionally gifted, pious Catholic convert and priest, to join the ranks of the hierarchy in the United States. The answer, given with a sardonic grin and in all candor, was: "None whatsoever." Still, the bishops of the U.S. show sometimes unexpected courage which is truly needed for talking about things of which they know so little, as, for instance, politics and economics. If you listen to some of them you get the impression that they think economically in the terms of a prison cell in which there are four inmates and one is a huge bully who deprives the rest of half of their daily rations. He gets stronger and stronger, the others weaker and weaker. I grant that this, indeed, forms a "social problem." In that fatal cell, however, there are only four walls, four stomachs and a lavatory, and this situation offers no analogy whatsoever to a free economy in a free society, where the surplus values of "capitalists" and managers by no means "go down the drain." Yet practical economics and economic theories have for a long time been the Achilles' heel of the entire *Orbis Catholicus*. Hence the weird texts of episcopal pronouncements in matters where fools rush in and angels fear to tread. (Has not the servant who did

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nothing about his talent been reprimanded for not having it invested with the bankers, *TOIS TRAPEZITAIS?*)

In the United States, priests were not educated at the great universities, as they are in the heart of Europe, but in seminaries whose horizon did not materially transcend a one-sided theology and a certain amount of philosophy. There was no art education, as testified to, for example, by the National Shrine in Washington, DC, a monstrous hodgepodge of practically all styles, as well as by countless other church interiors. Nor was there a true grasp of church history. As for psychology, sociology, or economics, instruction was only too often extremely naive, leaving these poor young men almost defenseless in the face of the onslaught of such primitive ideologies as Marxism-Leninism. But even the theological education became increasingly defective; the knowledge of Hebrew diminished rapidly, and Greek, at present, seems to follow. What we now see is a growing incapability to read the Scriptures in the original: even the original text of the Lord's Prayer poses two grave problems unknown to those ignorant of Greek. And knowledge of the theologies of the other Christian faiths? It is, as a rule, nonexistent. The results are ecumenic endeavors which merely increase the confusion in Christendom's American sector.

Thus, when the crisis following Vatican II developed on a global scale (as it really did), the Netherlands and the United States suffered most. There were the theologians who lacked the ability to be original within a narrow frame, within the limits of orthodoxy. One should be less afraid of those who remained still essentially Christian. Among them were those who with very little accuracy are sometimes called "Protestant," a label usually applied by those who are totally ignorant of the thought of the Reformers and who blame them for the relativist-individualistic vagaries of the First Enlightenment. The real menace, however, are those intellectual misfits who question the essentials of Christianity and shake the faith of many of the simple faithful. To them are directed the words of Matthew 18:6: "He who brings to fall one of those simple people who believe in me should have a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea where it is deepest." (This passage, indeed, has nothing to do with "scandalized children.") Of course, some of those heresiarchs are imported from Europe, men who have been expressly forbidden to teach theology but who, amazingly enough, are formally invited to spread their rank disbelief even in "Catholic" colleges and universities. These pitiful places of learning have to display to the Big Wide World how free, how independent, how emancipated, how "advanced," how open-minded, and how "impartial" they are! Wouldn't they love to see Christ's church as a mixture of the New York Ethical Society, the Red Cross, ADA, an association for social research and the RSPCA?

The trouble is that in the past the Church in America displayed very little sovereignty of mind—and does now much less so than ever. To be an exclusionist, to be standoffish, to go stubbornly one's own way without establishing fruitful contacts is admittedly wrong; yet to be an assimilationist ready to surrender one's own character and convictions is infinitely worse. The age-old pent-up desire to be "like the rest" now seems to be given full reign; at long

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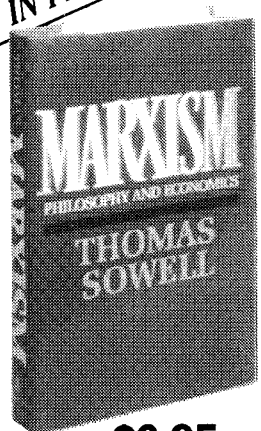

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last American Catholics can jump on the bandwagon of all popular causes and show to an astonished world that this weird, odd, exotic, "un-American" dago-religion can be eminently useful, nay, that it can serve "progress."

Some of the new theologians have tried to remain within the boundaries set by the Gospels and have merely misinterpreted them. It has been conveniently overlooked that Our Lord was of Davidic origin, of royal blood, and thus he has become a social revolutionary, a forerunner of the Maryknollers in Guatemala and of the killer-priests of South America. We are told that early Christians were pacifists (though, as Harnack proved, Christianity was particularly strong in the Roman army), and we are informed that all men are completely equal in the eyes of God. (Making Judas Iscariot the "equal" of St. John the Baptist is an amusing idea.) And if the exegesis of poverty as a sanctified condition by the new breed of theologians is really correct, why then a "War Against Poverty"? (And what about the important distinction between poverty and misery?) I still recall an American priest thundering that the Vatican should sell all its art treasures and give the proceeds to the poor. But what would the pious (and impious) Romans say if the interior decorations of St. Peter were to be transferred to the homes of Wall Street tycoons, Japanese video-manufacturers, and Arab oil-sheiks? I had to remind the thunderingly righteous priest of Christ's words that the poor are always going to be with us. (Significantly, it was the Pharisees who hurled *their* "social protest" against Mary Magdalene's luxurious gift.)

Others in the American church have gone beyond Scripture by declaring that Christ and His Apostles were prisoners of the spirit of their time. These innovators are, apparently, firmly convinced that they are truly timeless, whereas the very opposite is true. According to their own admission, they want to "update" the Church. They are not ready to fashion and form the world and the time (as it would be the Church's task) and, as it is expressed in the Prayer to the Holy Spirit, "to renew the face of the Earth." On the very contrary: they want to bring religion onto the wavelength of the present time, disregarding the words of Kierkegaard: "He who plans to be married to the spirit of the time will soon be a widower."

Christianity did not in the least harmonize with the spirit of the first three centuries A.D., but it nonetheless won out. The whole Roman Establishment, society, and the brightest minds of that period were violently opposed to it. The loud complaint that in Christianity, women have such a "lowly" position refers to the "backwardness" of antiquity which profoundly influenced primitive Christianity. Spiritually, however, women are not in the least disadvantaged in comparison with men: they have equal chances for salvation and sainthood—which to a Christian is *all* that really matters. In the Catholic and in the Eastern Church, moreover, the Saint of Saints is Mary, Mother of Christ. Ecclesiastically, of course, the situation is different. Here Scriptures clearly assign different roles to the sexes.

In America's Catholic Church, however, the question of sex roles has stirred controversy which could only have developed in a specifically American situation. North America is North European by origin, and in this cultural orbit women of all classes have suffered from a curious sort of isolation and frustration. It is not entirely impossible that the very "masculine" spirit of the Reformers, so hostile to the veneration of Saints, has something to do with it. American matriarchy certainly is a myth. Already Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the Founding Fathers, discovered that in France women had an infinitely better social position than in either Britain or the United States. Indeed, women in America live, to a larger extent, lives very much of their own and on their own. They have penetrated into areas once reserved for men (politics, business, sports), but the advance is limited and has not really improved their status in human terms. (Of course, nobody really wants to see women as coal miners, combat soldiers, or executioners. He who loves women does not want to see them as mud-wrestlers, either.)

Friendships between men and women are rare, and American males tend to like, love, or desire women in particular, but rarely in general. I well remember flights between San Francisco and Los Angeles "Reserved for Gentlemen Only." In an American world of male clubs and leagues, from the Knights of Columbus to the Free Masons, where misogyny pervaded the old universities and where the trend was away from intensive family life, women in America became singularly "unfulfilled." The general female dissatisfaction and frustration has spilled over into the women's orders. Here it also should be said in all candor that community life for women is even more problematic than for men.

It is not entirely accidental that the Great Catholic Crisis in America has erupted first in convents and their educa-

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

Pagans and Heathens

The modern English word *pagan* comes from the Late Latin *paganus*, "country dweller." Similarly, our word *heathen*, from the Old High German, originally referred to the uncivilized rustics on the heath. Both words came to mean "infidel" or "unbeliever" because the old idolatry lingered on in the countryside long after Christianity had prevailed in the urban parts of the Roman Empire. In recent centuries, however, cities have more often served as centers of secularism. Harvey Cox did not, after all, call his most famous book *The Secular Farm Belt*. The national media, the public schools, the ACLU, and the metropolitan bureaucracies of our "main-line" churches have all done their worst, but somehow the faith of our fathers stubbornly lingers in the hinterlands, making Christian piety a disproportionately rural phenomenon in the modern world. A 1983 poll conducted by the *Des Moines Register and Tribune* found that Iowa's farm folk were much more likely to hold a discernibly Christian morality than their citified cousins. Once the raw farmers in the villages depended on the missionaries from such urban centers as Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, and Paris to teach them the gospel. But if the faith then preached is to exert decisive influence in American culture again, it may be up to the "pagans" and "heathens" in the farm country of Kansas, Idaho, and Southern Carolina.

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tional establishments. The rebellion finally combined aspects of misandry with a new political agenda, and politics is, besides the penal system, the scene of mankind's most obvious and most painful failures. To make matters worse, the political vision now invoked is the sort of *democracy* revived by the French Revolution after a gap of 2,000 years. Viewed with horror by the Founding Fathers and imported to America only in the second quarter of the last century, egalitarianism's American record includes two world wars to "make the world safe for democracy," both of which inadvertently paved the road to abysmal tyrannies (as Plato and Aristotle clearly foretold us). Democracy rests on majority rule and equality, whereas the basic principle of Christian justice is not equality, but Ulpian's "To Everybody His Due."

The reader of the minutes of the Woman Church Coalition meeting in Chicago (November 11-13, 1983) has to make up his mind whether to laugh or to cry. "We are Woman Church not in exile, but in exodus," a leader cried out. Needless to say, a number of bishops endorsed this fabulous pow-wow whose driving ideas are clearly of the left. The ladies wanted to be "in the swim," but right is right, and left is wrong. Yet a "Woman's Church" with a He-She God-Goddess (this ludicrous expression was actually used!) would certainly not get the support of the vast majority of women. Wars, finally, can be won only by the infantry. Without our female infantry the Church would be lost—and the vast bulk of Catholic womanhood would emphatically not tolerate but desert a Church designed by these "Catholic" feminists.

These battle-axes, however, represent merely one facet of the Church's general problem which consists in the surrender to the *aiôn*, i.e., the spirit of the Time and of the World. (The English words "secular" and "temporal" express the fundamental unity and identity of both concepts.) But one also might ask whether this Augean Stable can still be effectively cleaned up by the present Pontiff who is becoming increasingly aware of the depth of this crisis—cleaned up before we see a schism. Schism is a distinct possibility. But on the basis of my experience with the Church in America, covering on and off nearly a half century, I believe that the exodus of a small minority would be more likely, just as in the days of Vatican I when the "Old Catholics" (the great, unfulfilled hope of the left) seceded from the Church Universal. An "American Church" might cause big juridical problems (Church property!), might produce a redoubtable number of apostasies in the clergy and among the remaining religious, but the main body of the laity would remain loyal to Rome. Such a schism might after all prove a real blessing. The strength of the Catholic Church lay always with the simple faithful and the great minds—not with the half-educated, doubt-ridden middle-of-the-roaders. And let us remember that the world has reacted to the "Progressivists" in our camp as was to be expected: with great publicity, but also with utter contempt. (And so have those admirable people in the Reformation Churches who staunchly stick to God's Revealed Word . . . from the late Karl Barth down to the steadfast Fundamentalists.)

The pre-Conciliar Church in America was not sheer delight, but she was infinitely preferable to the present chaos. And we also have to admit that the *Ecclesia Hibernica* of the past was providential. She represented the medieval spirit, the Irish being the only Catholics who never experienced the Renaissance which gave the *Orbis Catholicus* its lasting profile. Without the Irish clergy the nascent Church in America would never have reached first base. A newly created "American Church," however, would not be Catholic but local—and it would soon become dissolved in the big slime of modernity, mimicry, and mediocrity. What we have now to do is to stop, within the precincts of the Church, the braying of the Trojan Asses belonging to the theological demimonde.

Some time ago *The New Yorker* published a cartoon of unique depth. It shows two men in Hell. One says to the other: "My motto was 'Go with the Flow,' but I had no idea that the flow would end up here." In view of the crisis in America's Catholic Church, one can only hope for an exodus of the worshipers of the World and the Spirit of Time. But he who knows his Church history in truth will be neither too dismayed, nor surprised or downhearted. Hope, after all, is, together with Love and Faith, a "theological virtue."

Fruitless Grain

(continued from page 10)

> becomes in fact a rather conservative creature, for he is dependent on natural laws, a thousand years old; do what you will, no revolution will hasten the time of germination, or allow the lilac to flower before May; so the man becomes wise and submits to laws and customs.

Diocletian, after he retired from governing the Roman Empire, devoted himself to growing cabbages. Too many of us, these days, would rather rule the world—or, at least, the U.S. We read the papers, watch Dan Rather, and brood over Lebanon, over Libya, over the Senate race in North Carolina. We are like the man in *Rasselas* who was afraid to go to sleep, because he was convinced the stars might fall if his attention wavered.

The American Empire, like the empires of Rome and Britain, will have its season, but it will be a short one if we refuse to mind our own business. There is no simple political remedy for mass society and for the increasingly totalitarian way of life that Western nations are busy inflicting upon themselves. The best advice, however, was given by Gabriel Marcel, who recommended small-scale associations of friends, neighbors, and workmates. The more we depend on ourselves and each other, the less will we be inclined to rely on the masters to whom we have bound ourselves. It is the gardener's wisdom to make his own yard beautiful and productive before presuming to advise his neighbor on soil pH; to cultivate his garden before making the world safe for democracy.

—*Thomas Fleming*

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In the Land of Cotton *by Clyde Wilson*

"The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

—Jeremiah

Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880 by Pete Daniel, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

As Rare as Rain: Federal Relief in the Great Southern Drought of 1930-31 by Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

When we write of *Southern* rural life (as when we write of Southern speech, manners, history, or literature) we essay a phenomenon significantly different from that which would normally be suggested were the modifier "Southern" to be replaced by "American."

In the beginning, Southern agriculture laid the foundation for America. It was Southern tobacco, and to a lesser extent rice, indigo, cotton, and naval stores, which provided the economic incentive and *raison d'être* for the British settlement of North America. Aside from the fur trade, the Northern colonies had no function in the British Empire except as a haven for Dissenters. The adherence of the South to the War for Independence was an act of sheer political idealism, against self-interest and without the economic and religious motivations of New England.

Even through the first half of the 19th century, the Southern staples were the core of American agriculture. During most of that period cotton made up more than half the dollar value of exports of the United States. It therefore provided the wherewithal for our imports, and since the Federal government was chiefly financed through the tariff on imports, cotton provided the government's revenue base. The commercial greatness of New York was built to a considerable extent on the cotton-carrying trade. Alabama was a flush outpost of a vital international commodity when Indiana, at the same longitude westward, was still a backward world of subsistence farmers. It was not until the last decade before the Civil War that the great Midwestern breadbasket came into its own, with the construction of railroads to the Northeast and the production of machinery that could cultivate the virgin prairies and plains and harvest on a grand scale.

The great agricultural historian Lewis Cecil Gray has written that the plantation system constituted the scenic highlands of the antebellum Southern economy, though most of the land area was occupied by small independent farmers. Though rice, sugar, and hemp required the large capitalization of a plantation, cotton and tobacco were democratic crops that could be grown and sold for a profit as readily by the small farmer as by the planter. A considerable portion of the population, as has recently been reemphasized, lived in the Old South on the large-scale open-range grazing of livestock, an American adaptation of traditional British border economy and the direct, legitimate sire of what

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is thought of as "Western" ranching.

The South of the late antebellum period was prosperous and stable. The Southern population, including blacks, except in the less developed areas, lived snugly in rough abundance, content with the Jeffersonian ideal of independence and relatively immune from the tremendous religious and economic stresses of modernization being endured by Northern society. During the panic of 1857, when Northern banks and mercantile houses experienced a landslide of bankruptcy and the Bank of England saved itself by extraordinary measures, Southerners were hardly touched. It was at this juncture that an over-cocky Southern spokesman told the world that "Cotton is King!"

As always, hubris extracted its price. The failed war of Southern independence left the antebellum infrastructure in ruins. There was immense destruction, confiscation, and theft of property, without any postwar Marshall Plan. The slaves were freed, itself a vast liquidation of capital which at the same time drastically lowered the value of land in the most productive parts of the South. The freedmen were of interest to the North chiefly as political pawns. They had few economic alternatives except to remain on the land as a dependent labor force. Somehow, a considerable number of black people acquired land and achieved some independence. How this happened is not understood, because, while liberal historians have devoted billions of words to the black experience, they have shown little interest in how this truly constructive feat was accomplished.

The planter had few economic alternatives either. His capital, if he was lucky, consisted of the land and a cache of Confederate bonds. He had to borrow to supply and feed his labor force through the year; his survival depended on a network of credit that led ultimately to outside powers. The crop was already mortgaged before it was planted. There was no cash for wages; and anyway, too many Southerners, white and black, were endowed with the Jeffersonian ideal of independence to submit to wage labor. A system of sharecropping and tenantry grew up, leaving thousands of farmers at the mercy of distant forces of supply and demand over which they had no control. Except for flush periods, like World War I, the price often did not meet costs, and vast numbers sank into an inescapable pit of debt. A majority of the black population remained in a condition that cannot be called peonage because it was too vagrant. Startlingly, large numbers of formerly independent white families were reduced to similar status. In fact, by the end of the 19th century, the number of white croppers and tenants exceeded the number of black (though a higher percentage of the black population was in this condition). No Southerner ever suffered from the strange delusive assumption, encountered repeatedly in conversation with upper-middle-class Northern liberals, that most poor people are black and that poverty is chiefly the result of racism.

Although this brief sketch oversimplifies the history of Southern agriculture, it does provide the necessary context for FDR's famous statement that the South was the nation's Number One Economic Problem. The profitability of cattle and later oil in Texas and Oklahoma modified the picture, as did industrialization in some areas and the partial survival of the independent small farm class. But the bleak pronouncement remained broadly true. Meanwhile, Southerners continued to hold on to a militant Jeffersonianism, both as political program and folkway, for which the economic base had disappeared, while the North was swept along by that combination of open-ended material progressivism and social democracy which for most people constitutes the American way. Pete Daniel, in *Breaking the Land*, recounts that the Southern way of life began to change in the 1880's, with the arrival of agricultural colleges and extension agents, quintessential progressive American institutions, which generated a new sense of technical prowess and profit motive and thus began the slow transformation of Southern agriculture to its modern scientific and capitalist form. Daniel's work provides a sound and welcome amendment, but does not alter the larger story, for the real change came in the 1930's with mechanization and farm subsidies. This corrective commentary, by way of background, brings us to more recent

history and to the books in hand.

As Rare as Rain, the less important of these works, is concerned with the question of rural relief as it presented itself during the Depression year 1930, when the rainfall fell to as low as one-third of normal in parts of the South and pushed many people over the line between normal hard times and disaster. Thus we have a historical case study of pre-New Deal welfare—of the attempts to relieve localized suffering without a governmental apparatus of permanent relief. The author sees the case as another proof of the failures of Hooverism. Woodruff may well be right, for all I know, that a

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public and more permanent system of welfare was needed. However, I am not sure that the evidence presented proves the point. To begin with, the rural and urban problems of the Depression were different. It is not at all self-evident that a welfare system designed for industrial relief was the best answer to rural distress.

Woodruff's treatment falls into a recognizable genre of liberal complaint. Relief must not simply relieve distress, it must get to the root of "the problem of poverty"—that is, it must be political. The charitable institutions which assisted in the Southern crisis must, by definition, be judged failures. They did not try to use their leverage to alter the social structure which enlightened urban thinkers considered to be the fundamental cause of the problem. Heaven forbid, relief was even administered through local landowners and officials, who also were not political.

At the root of the analysis, though here expressed in a very mild and temperate form, is the urban intellectual's hatred and fear of the landowner or any rural person above the dependent class. Not sharing the urban liberal scale of manners and values, such persons represent a threat. The fear of the countryman is a persistent theme in American manufactured popular culture from the time of Sinclair Lewis. In television drama, the humane sensitive urbanite is always violated by the vicious small-towner, never the other way around (despite what statistics tell us about comparative crime rates). At present, thousands of the best minds of the East and West Coasts lie awake nightly into the wee hours, fretting in fear that primitive Christians from the boondocks may actually rise up and put a crimp in the drug traffic and pornography industry. This attitude, in a much more virulent form, accounts for the worst excesses of the Bolshevik Revolution. The Bolsheviks did more than adopt a mistaken farm policy; they deliberately set out to exterminate or enslave all independent and productive farmers, for whom they had an irrational hatred built upon feelings of vulnerability and inferiority.

It is not clear to me that Woodruff's evidence demonstrates that the old ways were completely hopeless, and it certainly does not demonstrate that the welfare and farm subsidy programs that have since grown up were the best or only alternatives. The most serious distresses seem to have been localized, like the credit crunch in the Arkansas delta, for instance, or to have involved a marginal lumpenproletariat of the sort that had always existed in the Kentucky mountains. It is not at all clear that the farmers who reluctantly asked for help *in extremis* were in the least interested in political revolution. And the landowners and small-towners whom the author finds controlled by their own narrow interests seem to me to have been, for the most part, decent, public-spirited, and commonsensical folks who were doing the best they could, and whose moral concern for their fellow man far transcends that of most Federal officials or college professors.

If *As Rare as Rain* is a political tract masquerading as an academic monograph, *Breaking the Land* offers a pastoral lament cast in the form of social history. Daniel tells the story of how the South moved from its 19th-century way of life (and it was a way of life and not simply a way of business) to modern commercial agriculture. It is a transformation in human affairs which he considers (with only slight exaggeration) "as significant as the enclosure movement that revolutionized the Old World." For anyone who knew the South as recently as the 1940's, there has indeed been a revolution. Any early-middle-aged South Carolinian can remember when almost every available patch of land was aglisten with cotton in the summer, and the mule and wagon was the most common moving sight on the roads. One has to look hard today to find a cotton field, and mules are about as numerous as zebras. Millions of Southerners, white and black, have moved to the North, the West, and the Southern cities. They have left behind them in the country a mechanized commercial agriculture employing only a fraction of the population; the remnants of a yeoman class which gets most of its income out of day labor in the city, though it still clings to the land; and sizable pockets of black communities which have not yet been integrated into the modern economy except insofar as it is represented by the Federal welfare system.

Daniel is less interested in the economics of Southern rural life in the last century than he is in the human story of the replacement of a way of life. The human experiences of the revolution are presented in *Breaking the Land* with vivid detail, without sentimentalizing the old way of life but with a sympathetic awareness of the genuine loss involved in the destruction of its more consoling features.

The author has another theme that will strike a responsive chord for all of those who are not willingly enfeoffed to the gospel of limitless material progress. The course of the changes that overtook the South was dictated, as portrayed by Daniel, by the decisions of large capital and government policy, decisions which often involved deliberate choice from an ideology of gigantism and maximum productivity. Indeed, it is quite fair to give the New Deal farm policies in the South the greatest share of credit for the pockets of dependency (as opposed to merely poverty) in the South, and as a second consequence of the same dislocations, the Northern urban nightmare. But there were indeed other alternatives, alternatives that, had decisions been made from a different scale of values, might have worked toward the preservation of the viable small farm, owned or tenanted, and toward an optimum rather than a maximum productive relationship with the land. Such policies were, in fact, suggested in the 1930's by Southern Agrarians and others who were enamored neither of big government nor big business. Among the many appealing proposals, none was more drastic than the suggestion that unemployed or underemployed families be staked to a homestead, even subsidized, to remain on the land and produce.

This is doubtless a shocking proposal to the coterie of sophisters and calculators, calling themselves conservatives, who have recently discovered that the production of the staff of life is just another form of corporate enterprise, that our farm support programs represent a nonsensical nostalgia, and that we must let the "marginal" farmer go to the wall so that the market can wisely redistribute resources. But even many who hold no particular brief for the present government price system

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recognize that every enlightened and prosperous nation on the globe makes special provision for its farmers, and not from an obsolete affection for the yeoman ideal. The truth is that the agricultural market is the great unsolved problem of the modern economy. No one has as yet devised more than a makeshift solution to the cycles of overproduction and underproduction and price fluctuation that have beset agriculture since at least the 18th century. Whatever due obeisance we give to the market, and much is due, there is something wrong with the approach of the sophisters and calculators.

Leave aside the *ad hominem* argument that some of these gentlemen were socialists until a few years ago and that they have never been nearer to a real farm than the Chicago futures market. What is more to the point, we do not start with a clean slate. The free market is a grand ideal, but from the founding of the United States government until at least the 1930's, public policy was not laissez-faire but planned industrial growth by subsidy and favorable legislation for the industrial sector at the expense of farmers and consumers.

Today's agricultural support can be seen as a redressing of the balance. Today we have a government which builds and maintains waterways and airports for the yachts and private planes of the rich; which subsidizes illegitimacy on an immense scale; which bails out billion-dollar corporations; which pays untalented and obscene poets to write gibberish. Under the circumstances, it should not shock our free enterprise sensibilities too much to hope that policies can be devised that will not only allow the small farm to survive but to increase in numbers.

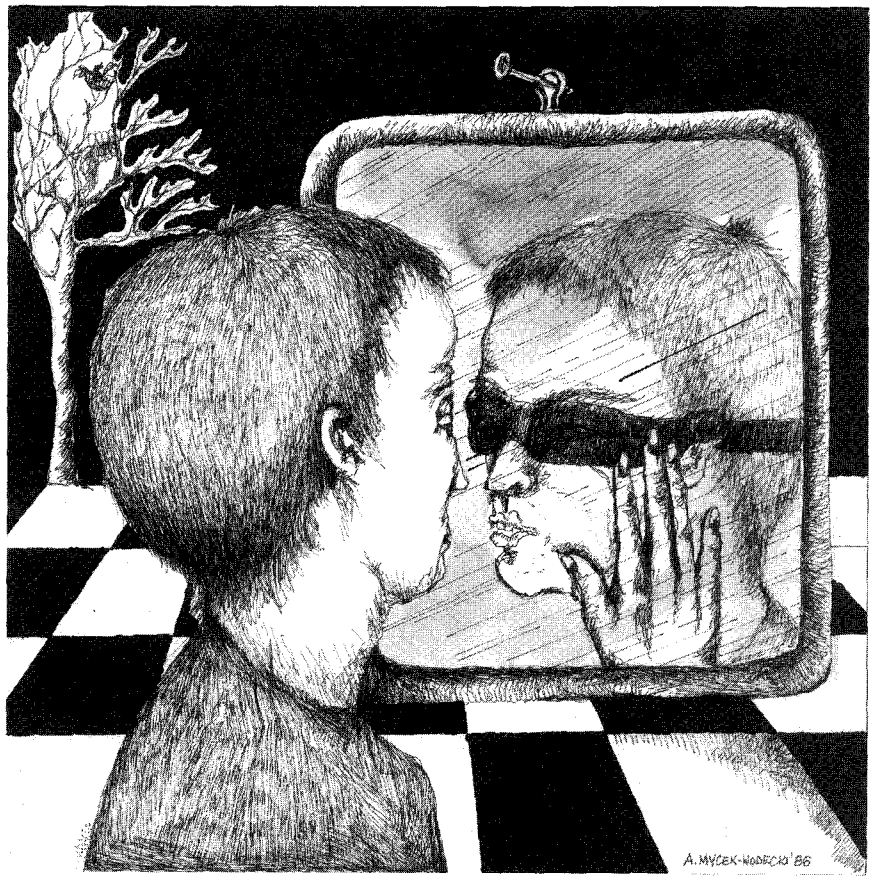
The goal of encouraging families to flourish on the land is both more attainable and more desirable than most of the ends for which public money is spent. I for one am willing to forego a good deal of the theoretical virtue and actual efficiency of the free market for such an end. I suspect that in the long run even the economic effect would be favorable, but I have no doubt that the social effect would be entirely to the good. For the life of nations, like the life of persons, is more than a balance sheet.

Haunted by Yesterday *by David Hallman*

"In literature, it is the hereditary spirit that still prevails."

—George Santayana

The Summoning by Robert Towers, New York: Harper & Row.



Nothing is more dangerous for the critic than taking a book cover at face value. But when the blurbs compare the author to William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Saul Bellow, the challenge is irresistible. And since these are the claims with which Harper & Row confronts the reader of Robert Towers' novel, *The Summoning*, the publisher is setting its own standards for the critics. Remarkably, the novel does not disappoint *unless* it is held up to those high literary comparisons the publisher has implanted in the reader's mind.

Although the action is set in the South and Towers tries to evoke a heavily Southern atmosphere, the comparisons to Bellow and to a lesser extent Percy, with their depictions of existential *angst* and quests for "meaning," are more valid than the evocations of Faulkner and O'Connor.

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More important, the novel raises questions which have disturbed sensitive critics over the past decade or so: Why does even the best-written, most ambitious, and well-crafted of contemporary literature seem "minor"? Why has no literary voice emerged to capture indelibly whatever soul is left in contemporary Western culture? And what are the implications of this failure—whether of the imagination or of the culture it would reflect—for us, the audiences the art must speak to? With the exception of the 81-year-old Robert Penn Warren, no major writer in America today bears comparison with the remarkable generation of writers who dominated our literature after World War I—which was precisely when Warren got his precocious start as the youngest member of the Fugitive group of poets.

An insightful explanation for the contemporary crisis in American letters comes from a retrospective essay, "Why the Modern South Has a Great Literature," by Donald Davidson, one of Robert Penn Warren's Fugitive colleagues and teachers. According to Davidson, great literary epochs occur when artists are forced into "a moment of self-consciousness" because their traditions are threatened by certain cultural and social changes, "when a writer awakes to realize what he and his people truly are, in comparison with what they are being urged to become." He defines a traditional society as:

> . . . stable, religious, more rural than urban, and politically conservative. Family, blood-kinship, clanship, folkways, custom, community, in such a society, provide the needs that in a non-traditional society are supplied at great costs by . . . governmental agencies. A traditional society can absorb modern improvements up to a certain point without losing its character. If modernism enters to the point where the society is thrown a little out of balance but not yet completely off balance, the moment of self-consciousness arrives.

Davidson supports his thesis with Periclean Athens, Rome of the late republic, Dante's Italy, and Elizabethan England. His argument can aid greatly in placing a novel like *The Summoning* in perspective.

It is almost axiomatic now that the self-consciousness of our culture has become a kind of narcissism; as Tate put it in one of his best poems, contemporary man has become like some bloated Alice, paralyzed by her own image in the looking glass and stripped of volition to act. This extension of the modern dilemma from protest to self-indulgent subjectivism is inevitably reflected in the art. The voices of World War II are the likes of Norman Mailer and James Jones; of the Korean War, only William Styron; and while there is a growing body of interesting Vietnam-like period fiction, no definitive voices have emerged to bring meaning to the chaos. The traumas of the Holocaust and the Civil Rights and feminist movements have produced painful cries of ethnic and sexual outrage, but no great art. Earlier Depression-era fiction, with its proletarian focus, already seems badly dated. Such is the context in which the highly touted Towers novel must be read.

Towers, a Southerner who earned his Ph.D. at Princeton and now teaches at Queens College in New York, develops his story of revenge and spiritual revelation in the dramatically potent setting of post-civil-rights Mississippi. The protagonist, Lawrence Hux, is also a transplanted Southerner, Princeton Ph.D., and a foundation executive in New York. In his late 30's, Hux is divorced and approaching a mid-life identity crisis involving his past as well as present life. While working as a civil-rights activist in Mississippi during the early 1960's, Hux had abandoned his mission to return to Princeton. Carrying on the struggle, his best friend is eventually murdered by a prominent small-town doctor who, in the volatile atmosphere of those days, was acquitted in a local court. Now—10 years later—a haunting apparition of the martyred friend stirs up Hux's guilt and sends him back to Mississippi to exact his personal revenge. What he finds there, in the waning days of the Watergate crisis, is the crux of the novel.

Inventing as a pretext for his return a foundation project to study library collections at several Mississippi colleges, Hux is drawn into an elaborate masquerade which allows him to insinuate himself into Dr. Claiborne Herne's life. He discovers the doctor to have become a shattered recluse, liv-

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ing alone with his spinster sister and the ghosts of his own guilt. Before the murder, Dr. Herne had been a patrician patron to local black youths. One of his protégés, ironically named Rooney Lee, now dominates the doctor's life by forcing him to submit to flagellation by Rooney's wife. Hux takes advantage of a religious vulnerability in Herne's sister to pose as an evangelist and win her confidence, but then, while attending a real evangelical tent-meeting revival, undergoes a profound religious conversion himself and is forced to reexamine the implications of his vengeance. In the zeal of his new faith, Hux confronts the doctor with his crime and forces him to kneel in prayer. The novel ends tumultuously with Dr. Herne's suicide and Hux's near-fatal beating by the criminal Rooney Lee.

Perhaps the publishers and early reviewers should be forgiven for drawing obvious parallels between *The Summoning* and the works of such authors as Bellow, Percy, O'Connor, and Faulkner. The emptiness of Hux's New York life and career—divorced, deprived of his son, and void of professional satisfaction—is the familiar existential problem of much modern literature. When Hux is "summoned" to avenge his dead friend's murder, his life assumes purpose, although it is the discovery of his true summons that exorcises the ghosts of the past and frees the emotionally crippled Hux to love again. The Deep South setting and the treatment of racial guilts are, of course, highly suggestive in themselves. Many readers will recognize characteristics of "Southern Gothic" literature. There are unmistakable echoes of such religious grotesques from Flannery O'Connor as the fake Bible salesman Manley Pointer in Hux's imposture as a traveling evangelist, of the "Misfit" in the malevolent Rooney Lee, and of Hazel Motes, whose mission to found a "Church Without Christ" becomes a profound spiritual quest. But *The Summoning* ends on an ambiguous theological note, as Hux (who has at least been reborn to the capacity for commitment) says, "Jesus was the name I spoke, the name I prayed to. But the name doesn't seem necessary to me now, maybe not even useful anymore." The apparent parallels with O'Connor, Percy, or Faulkner prove misleading. Towers does not show Percy's talent for exposing the absurdities of contemporary life in comic action. And he lacks O'Connor's ability to kick the reader in his literary stomach; the novel is devoid of the metaphysical hilarity that makes us laugh at her characters while we are aghast at their fate. Nor does Towers—or any other writer today—possess Faulkner's Olympian vision of the myth and tragedy implicit in the Southern experience.

Still, no less a writer than Eudora Welty has complained of the problem of settling down to write her "delta" fiction only to be haunted by the shadow of Faulkner's mountains looming on the horizon. Ernest Hemingway used to describe writing as a kind of boxing competition, of putting on the gloves with the likes of Turgenev or Stendhal, and Towers undoubtedly knew what he was taking on in *The Summoning*. In fact, the ghost of Southern fiction past—especially the example of Faulkner—is one of the spirits the novel explicitly attempts to exorcise, even as the author inevitably evokes it.

Jean-Paul Sartre once compared Faulkner's vision of the world to "that of a man sitting in a convertible looking back." Only the past is real. At one point early during his visit to Ole Miss, Hux—in his role as foundation executive—uses one of the "Faulkner Weekends" held regularly there to revere and exploit the author's name as an occasion to ridicule the Southern tendency to dwell on what is lost. Seated next to a visiting Faulkner scholar, Hux adopts an exaggerated Mississippi accent to taunt the professor's infatuation:

> I've just been proposing . . . that sump'm ought to be done about Bill Faulkner's body . . . that they ought to exhume it, and then hire a team of expert morticians to touch it up so's they could exhibit it. You know, jus' like Lenin's, only in the parlor at Rowan Oak 'stead of the Kremlin.

By mocking the adulation of Faulkner, Towers is trying to escape from the shadows still cast by the giants of the Southern Renaissance. Yet it is Hux's own idolatrous worship of his dead friend's memory and his own sense of lingering guilt from the past that has provoked his own quest for revenge and redemption.

But the past does not mean for Towers what it meant for Faulkner, for in the end Hux *does* leave his past behind, convinced that his murdered friend won't "come back that way again." And in spite of the author's effort to avoid the stereotypical "Southern" novel, the familiar figures and themes are all here, if sometimes developed with a new twist. The fundamentalist evangelist who converts Hux to his own firebrand religion by recounting his own sins and then offering the possibility of rebirth—"I that was dead am now living"—is never revealed satisfactorily as either charlatan showman or divine instrument. The depiction of the maverick Rooney Lee, though, suggests that Towers is developing a more complex approach to the "Southern problem" of racial guilt, one rising above the simplistic hair-shirt of racial guilt. But the customary small-town Southern characters abound—especially Dr. Herne and his spinster sister. And the city (Memphis, in this case) is painted in the usual colors of sinister corruption.

The occasional lapses into caricature and stereotype do not, however, obscure the author's genuine talent. In its virtues and its faults, *The Summoning* might put the reader most in mind of Robert Penn Warren, as *novelist*. Like Warren, Towers is an expatriated Southerner. Over his last five or six novels, Warren—transplanted to Yale and Connecticut—has shown a progressively less-sensitive "feel" for the pulse and soul of his regional material, and his Southern voice seems increasingly strained. Towers is struggling with the same problem. *The Summoning* is marked by a great deal of documentary realism—descriptions and references to Memphis and northern Mississippi will be familiar to any reader who knows the lay of the land—but the familiarity is uneasy, and the novel lacks that un-self-conscious use of natural resources that the reader is more affected by than aware of. But like Warren, Towers is willing to take on large themes with intelligence and skill, no mean feat in today's literary climate.

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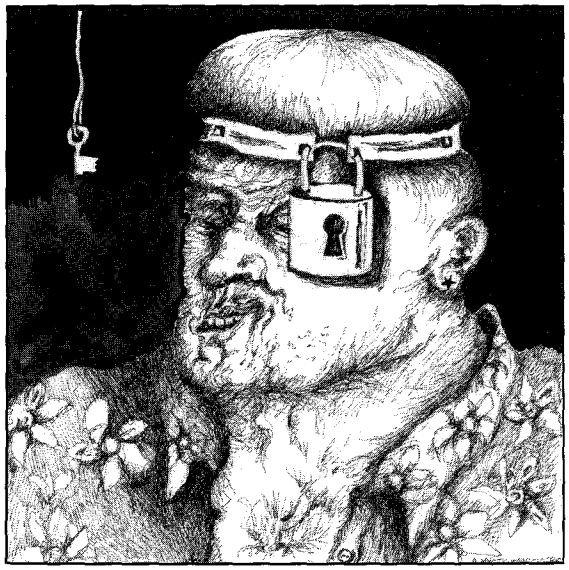
Hillbillies and Rednecks *by Tommy W. Rogers*

"Taake my word for it, Sammy, the poor in a loomp is bad."

—Tennyson

The Southern Redneck: A Phenomenological Class Study **by Julian B. Roebuck and Mark Hickson III, New York: Praeger.**

Two professors at Mississippi State University, a sociologist and a communicationist, have decoupaged their observations, experiences, and intrapsychic projections into a "phenomenological analysis" of the Southern redneck. If their work has any redeeming social value, it is as a kind of thematic apperception test that tells more about the authors and their manner of seeing than it does as any reliable morphology of rednecks. *The Southern Redneck* does illustrate that some metaphysics (or underlying value presuppositions) always shape the interpretation of events. Such is the case whether the values form a Reformational or Christian world view, or, as in the case at hand, whether they are pinioned on Marxian fundamentalism.



Seen through the authors' preconceptions, the Southern redneck is a vulgar, beer-filled, abusive, ignorant, hedonistic, inadequately deodorized, animalistic, cacogenic, thoroughly thoughtless, racist male who, like "the Southern white man of whatever class," is "the meanest man in the world in any type of situation." Their female counterparts are portrayed as "freaks of nature." The baseline model is that of poor white trash. True enough, the Southern woods *are* full of people who would scale rather high on any reasonable consensus of redneckery. Often they typify persons likely to be encountered driving trucks or manning service vehicles, managing or owning Secur-U-Stor rackets, doing time as "grunts" in the pulpwood, gas-pumping or table-waiting industries, people who are the substance of military manpower quotas—people likely to pile up in "mobile homes" in the trailer parks or to fill the subsidized apartments as 20-year-old dual-gravida females achieving the good life via the career cycle of a divorcee on welfare.

A valid scale of redneckery would have to account for psychological as well as financial factors. While command over resources has a great deal to do with any social evaluation, many redneck factory workers, equipment operators, and postal drones have a great deal of money, complete with big mortgage and RV. Many have the pecuniary accoutrements of style. Rednecks comparatively endowed financially often retain attitudinal and behavioral stigmata which stand out as distinctively as the Hebraic features of a Baptist Jew, and make them as readily identifiable as a Pentecostal in a $300 suit. One magenta peanut broker (who infamously charged the tax-victim public, whose lot it is to serve their betters, $12,000 for a rug with a serene sense of entitlement) served a term as U.S. President.

It is not that the composite phantasmagoria of Roebuck and Hickson is fraudulent in all particulars. The authors identify some features of the work- and live-a-day worlds of lower-class people in terms of recreation, associations, domesticity, and language, guaranteed to bring forth a hearty "Ho hum, I've always said so myself" from any person who is a member of, or who regularly associates with, any of the redneck species. The authors have picked up on some subtle traits, too, e.g., rednecks do not like phonies (which may explain why certain professors feel nervous visiting redneck bars).

An abstract ideal type can perhaps be built around the commonalities of the life-styles of such culturally diverse groups as Georgia crackers, Louisiana swamp rats, Carolina lintheads, Tennessee mountaineers, Arkansas hillbillies, and Mississippi go-getters (the female works in the garment industry and the spouse will "go get her" at shift change time). If there is a culture of poverty, as Oscar Lewis contends, some modes of adjustment, attitudinal and behavioral features, and reactions to similarities of place in the hierarchy of things will result in some commonalities whether the population is situated in Mexico City, Johannesburg, or Jefferson County, Alabama. But the authors' composite picture of the redneck is valid only in the same sense that a description of the "farm animal" as "a creature who grazes in meadows, sometimes pulls a plow or wagon, roosts in trees at night, and stands on a fencepost each A.M. and crows in the new day" is accurate. Each trait is indeed applicable to *some* farm animals. However, the descriptive elements are not rightly sorted, and it is rather clear that the resultant imagery is not useful as fact or type. It is this kind of distorted thinking that gives us the authors' *das Redneckery*.

But the manner in which the authors combine elements finally depends upon ideological doctrine, not "research findings." And in ideology, the authors are true believers, devoted to intrusive sermonizing inspired by

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the creed granted imprimatur from the synagogue of St. Marx. Any deficiencies *The Southern Redneck* may exhibit in terms of what C. Wright Mills called the "sociological imagination" is more than compensated for by the authors' deftness at what might be described, with slight apology to Mills, as the sociological hallucination.

It is not that the authors are bad people, nor bearers of unwelcome news. Indeed, they are champions of the right, eager to tell us in definitive terms what the South needs. The catch is that the Southerners' lack of adversarial consciousness makes it difficult to get the utopian crusade defined and started.

I have no doubt that the authors report 'em as they see 'em, identifying supply-side economics as the cause of inflation, the "happenings" directed by Huey P. Long as "the most enlightened and noblest undertaking in Southern history," and all. The authors lay aside Scripture in favor of Marx in arguing that "the world could not be redeemed through man's belief but rather through the rising up of the poor." They seek salvation through "social justice" and "human liberation" as inspired by the "Russian revolutionary experiment" or promoted as a "sacred Christian [sic] movement" in the South by Miles Horton, James Dombrowski, Frank Graham, and similar ilk in the 1930's.

The authors may well believe anything their doctrine tells them they ought to believe. But it strains credulity to believe even they think that "rednecks [did] not believe that Herschel Walker eats with the white players on the Georgia team" or that "rednecks did not know that Walker goes to classes with young, white girls in Athens, Georgia." Research "findings" or expression of an ideological fetish carried by the authors? In their doctrinal portfolio, racism *must* be pervasive. Their religious orthodoxy (Marxist fundamentalism) demands it.

It would probably be unnecessary lack of charity to suggest that the perpetuators of such distortions must either be: (a) charlatans; or (b) trained *ignoropaths* (not quite the same thing as a sociopath) who project their own dogmas onto the subjects supposedly being described. Perhaps the authors are not truly responsible for their own acts and assessments. As trained sociologists, they may well be eunuchs in matters of judgment.

It must be conceded that Roebuck and Hickson have set forth the basis for an enchanting party game. Read a line, and ask others if they think such is characteristic of a redneck. Or ask a redneck. Or play solitaire, and see how you score out. Are you fortunate enough that your wife is impressed by Marabel Morgan? Yahooooooooo—it's a gotcha! The authors claim Morgan's *The Total Woman* is regarded by redneck women as a "godsend" for salvaging their marriages. Do you have animosity toward Jerry Falwell? Better develop some quick, or it's a gotcha. The authors claim, "The redneck's solution to his problem is to side with the Moral Majority and leaders such as Jerry Falwell."

Are you fearful, frustrated, alienated, hysterical, and hyperventilating "in light of the current trend . . . as evidenced by reactionary politics"? If not, you are likely to be one of the "hunting, fishing, drinking, socializing" types enmeshed in a small, closeknit "poor white subculture that has endured since antebellum times." As such, you are a lout, a derivative of a rigid, marginal, politically isolated group in a semi-traditional society "articulated to a class system based upon materialism, traditionalism, paternalism, racism, and religiosity . . . a remarkable culture not conducive to class consciousness, economic well-being, or upward social mobility."

True belief requires its demonology; knights must have dragons. The authors find President Reagan an unacceptably nonrapacious proponent of "new welfare policies [that] will cause more human suffering in the South than any other federal action since the Civil War"; a veritable genocidist, portending threat of return to "a primitively oriented criminal justice system, weakened labor unions, and the loss of some civil rights [that is, civil riots] movement gains."

The authors wax hysterical denouncing an alleged alignment of KKK, Moral Majority, white middle-class, small pensioners, small businessmen, lower-echelon professionals, tradesmen, small farmers, rural dwellers (nomenclature theirs), and the roadhouse set with baseball caps advertising Coors: it all adds up to "a brand of conservative populism reminiscent of that preached by George Wallace . . . on the upsurge in the South." The resultant horrors are specified as "significant victories against church and state [no, the authors did *not* mean in Louisville, Nebraska, where Christian education was criminalized], abortion for women, pornography, liberal congressmen, certain freedom of the press rights." The times are evil. "The little Southern liberal-

REVISIONS

Green Thoughts in a Green Shade

Karel Čapek is best known for his whimsical nightmares of 20th century life, *RVR* and *The War With the Newts*—early warnings against the depersonalization and loss of autonomy so characteristic of the modern state. He was also the author of gently satiric tales that seem to show the decency of ordinary men. Leopold Tyrmand was fond of quoting from Čapek's little fables, and before his death he ordered a review copy of *The Gardener's Year* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), a superb set of works and days in which any gardener will be able to recognize himself:

> . . . a real gardener is not a man who cultivates flowers; he is a man who cultivates the soil. He is a creature who digs himself into the earth. . . . He builds his monument in a heap of compost. If he came into the Garden of Eden he would sniff excitedly and say: "Good Lord, what humus!"

Čapek's genial conservatism was watered in his little garden in Prague, and his little book is the perfect gift for the gardener or his disgruntled spouse.

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ism that existed in the South during the 1930s appears to be dead."

Show me a Jeeter Lester prototype who has even heard of Jerry Falwell (albeit his grandmother may watch him on TV), much less have the cerebral capacity to make common cause with Moral Majority initiatives, and I'll show you a rare individual. A baseline redneck female who quotes Marabel Morgan, Darien Cooper, or Phyllis Schlafly may have surfaced somewhere, but my "research findings" tell me that the probability of locating a person with such a combination of traits is less than the likelihood of finding a Spanish-speaking giraffe in a dairy herd.

How could such incongruous reasoning come to be solemnized in print? Simple. Such thinking is well within one standard deviation of the mean of accepted professorial wisdom. The picture of tobacco chewing, Budweiser-gutted simian with the moral fortitude to assess moral-political-social issues and to identify with the world view of Moral Majority *is* credible to them. For them, both the redneck life-style and the Moral Majority perspective are worthless and by that criteria are fungible. Such incongruous combinations of traits are constitutive to liberal cautery. How else do we explain the charges of "fascism" and "anti-Semitism" leveled against the almost sycophantically pro-Israel political and religious figures on the right.

Contrary to the authors' representations, Southerners are not mesmerized by consciousness of race. The Southerners' intuitive sense of place—as a human being among other human beings, not as a repository of displaced anger on a mission—combined with the lineage of republican virtue continues to provide some leavening consistency and a relatively immunizing effect to statist orthodoxy. For many Southern whites, blacks, like fire ants, are often an undesirable component of reality. However, aversion to blacks is not a component of political consciousness, except in the demonology of liberal *moralesse oblige*. The rednecks are rather tolerant—not requiring a whites-for-whites consciousness, although constantly faced with blacks-for-blacks political arguments. As a general rule, they join with blacks in electing faithful Democrats (e.g., blacks and rednecks united to elect George Wallace and numerous other governors and legislators in the post-1970 era). True enough, Southern voters have never kept a proper rein on politicians. In the pre-1970 era, when segregation was almost the only issue in many elections, the voters proved gullible. Professed (though not lasting) support for segregation served liberal politicians well as a camouflage for hiding from the voters their overall commitment to an adversary culture. Far too easily fooled by this tactic, Southerners allowed men like Lister Hill, John Sparkman, and Jim Fulbright long careers. To its credit, however, the South has also sent men like Richard Russell, Sam Ervin, John Rarick, Larry McDonald, and Jim Allen to office.

The authors' South is that of Wilbur Cash, not Richard Weaver. Like Weaver, however, the authors feel that religion is an idea which has consequences. The authors posit the religion of the Southerner as a Calvinistic, puritanical gospel which emphasizes salvation rather than class warfare, an opiate that keeps the redneck masses poor and docile. The Southern white the authors depict is racist, sectionalist, provincial, harshly Calvinistic, sensual, a hedonistic fascist who represents a detestible history and despicable folk culture filled with "a necessary Christianity and cruelty." The authors regard as malevolent any manifestation of religion in the South which is not rooted in Calvinistic biblicism or the Reformational lineage.

The authors' central complaint, however, is not religious but political: the redneck wants a government of the fashion which the Republic was founded to perpetuate. Rednecks "hate bureaucracy. They want the government to take a laissez-faire approach to them as individuals." Even when removed from the South by employment, Southerners do not become displaced persons spiritually, but are oriented toward home. "They wish to stay in the South, and when they leave, they maintain their traditions elsewhere—and look forward to an eventual return to kith and kin." Rednecks wish to avoid entanglement with government, and they buy their guns, trucks, tools, and fishing equipment as symbols of their independence, self-dignity, and regional attachments. Being men who are given to thinking in communal and associational terms rather than in artificial, contrived, rhetorical, or class interest categories, they are ill-fitted for their assigned place in Marxist dogma.

Southern poverty, as the authors assess it, is the result of sin, specifically the wickedness of insufficient unionization, resulting from an inadequately developed class consciousness. It would be pointless on this issue to debate the economics of comparative advantage with the authors, for their commitment to unionization as a cure to poverty is fundamentally a matter of faith, not reason. The ignored reality is that contemporary unions are generally organized *against* other workers—not against capitalists—and often are organized against any reasonable concept of the common good. Expectations that unions will work (or strike) for the common good run contrary to the very purpose of unions.

As empty as *The Southern Redneck* is as a report on research findings, it does give the reader a religious testament, anathematizing the South's "fantastic historical mythology" and its cultural continuity over time with its "false consciousness tied to other-worldly religion." The authors have their own vision. In the name of Progress, the Southern legacy and *Weltanschauung* should be broken and Marxist fundamentalism enshrined in a newly raised "class consciousness." The quest is satisfied by the revolting against the old social bonds, not by reconstruction of visible new ones. No historical example, no factual reality which shows the millennium to be fictitious, can stand against the religious faith which inspires the destruction of old loyalties. It is not so much the idiosyncracies, the argot, the life-style of rednecks, their aversion to *haute couture*, or their love for country music which incites the hatred of the intellectual messiahs. It is the whole of Southern history. The Southern legacy, and those who carry forth its lineage, reflect an ancient tradition steeped in organic Anglican liberty of restraint on compulsive power and its potential for accomplishing good, as contrasted with the Gallic liberty which seeks to free the exercise of

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power from limiting restraints in the quest for social good. The authors spring heavy with good deeds.

If the authors could somehow enlighten their redneck subjects, could infect them with enough social science septicemia to cause them to throw off their Southernism—with its outmoded religious and political values—*then* society could be shoved toward "meaningful structural change," and the "masses might be persuaded to work for the common good—[remember Ho, Mao, Idi, and Fidel?] whatever that is decided upon." As it is, however, the intellectual messiahs find their enlightened prescriptions defeated by a "fantastic unrealistic Southern myth" with its "false consciousness, a lack of social responsibility, and . . . savage ideal likened to the ethos of Nazi Germany," and an attendant "inexcusable failure to face Southern history and give up faulty traditions either emotionally or intellectually."

If they could, the authors would make displaced persons of the whole human race. In a metastatically Sandinistasized universe, civilization and progress would be measured by homage to the intellectual priest-kings for their ministrations in the cause. No longer would poor Southern rednecks be afflicted by the *zeitgeist* of "a pernicious lost cause [that] serves no worthy purpose and keeps the South tied to a dangerous mythology."

The victory of Yankee Springfields over Southern long rifles must not obscure the more fundamental reality that the South did not surrender its culture at Appomattox. "Since [1865] the redneck has remained religiously orthodox and has defended America's most reactionary economic values and institutions." That is one way of putting it. But in this context, "reactionary" is a high compliment. Roebuck and Hickson are baffled that "the more the South appears to be changing the more it remains the same—that is, its central core." For Southerners, the central core remains nutrient living stone.

The Re-Possessed *by Lee Congdon*

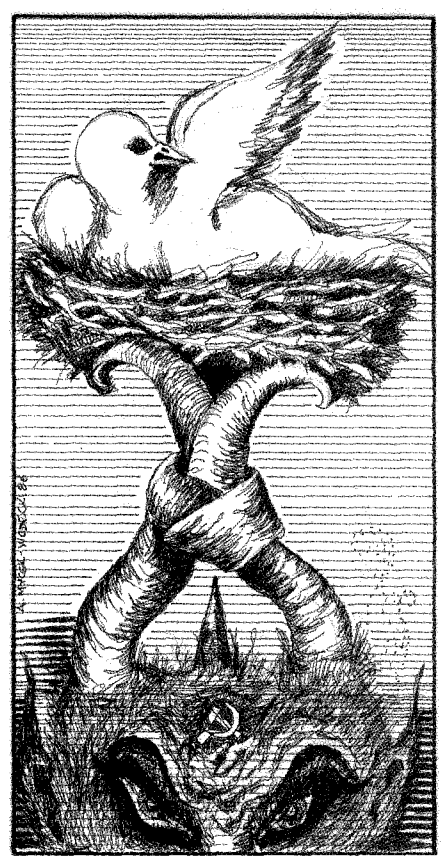
"In the end I shall have to renounce optimism."
—Voltaire

The Pied Piper: Allard K. Lowenstein and the Liberal Dream **by Richard Cummings, New York: Grove Press.**

In Defense of Liberal Democracy **by Walter Berns, Chicago: Regnery Gateway.**

Among other, more profound things, Dostoevski's antirevolutionary novel, *The Possessed*, is a withering dissection of liberal intellectuals. In its pages, liberals parade as hostile and irresponsible critics of a society that affords most of them a life of comfort and status. They are the "fathers" of those nihilist sons who pursued the logic of liberalism to its ultimate and destructive end. Horrified by the ruthless and cynical animal his revolutionary son Peter has become, Stepan Verkhovenski, a parasitic but high-minded liberal, cannot bring himself to repudiate the younger generation's radical vision of a new Russia because "it's our own idea—we were the first to plant it, to nurture it." But he does complain to a friend about "how it's expressed! It is so incredibly distorted and twisted around! You don't really imagine, do you, that that's what we were striving for? Who would ever recognize our original idea in that?" It is a question that many American liberals recently had reason to ask themselves as many of their disciples made of the United States a carnival of infantilism and violence. Perhaps, some of them concluded, Dostoevski was right after all—liberalism contains within it the seeds of its own debasement and dissolution. When they finally regained their voices, they spoke in the accents of neoconservatism.

More than a decade has now elapsed since the "Movement" of the 1960's ceased to be prime-time news, but many of its partisans are continuing the struggle, now focused on the quest for cultural "hegemony" and projected well into the future. Impatient with what they regard as a reactionary detour on the nation's road to revolution, their contempt for their former liberal mentors has begun to manifest pathological symptoms, witness Richard Cummings' reckless attack on Allard Lowenstein and, by extension, on a brand of politics that, despite its limitations, was patriotic,



Lee Congdon is author of The Young Lukács *(University of North Carolina Press).*

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meliorist, and anticommunist. By discrediting this popular and well-known liberal activist, Cummings intends to destroy any residual faith in the prospects for nonrevolutionary change. Liberalism, he insists, must make room for "radicalism," a political ideology that includes, but is not restricted to, communism.

Although Lowenstein was not the most illustrious liberal of his time, he was certainly the most ubiquitous. As leader of the National Student Association, a civil rights organizer, antiwar activist, and one-term congressman from New York, he was an indefatigable campaigner for such cherished liberal ideals as peace and justice, both at home and around the world. He achieved his greatest celebrity when he orchestrated the successful "Dump Johnson" movement prior to the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Widely respected within and outside of the liberal community, he was an inviting target. In order to expose liberalism as a sham, Cummings knew that he would have to smash its icons and make its most trusted spokesmen appear to be "inauthentic."

Cummings' principle charge is that Lowenstein was a secret CIA operative from 1962 to 1967 and that he always shared the liberal anticommunist objectives of the "good wing" of the agency. Accordingly, he advocated timely reform in the United States, as well as in such potential trouble spots as South Africa and Franco's Spain, in order to defuse the explosive material contained in more radical—often communist—movements. In this way, he was able to establish a reputation as a progressive while at the same time sabotaging the only forces that Cummings recognizes as legitimate, those that reject "the system" in its totality. Just so, we are encouraged to believe, all liberals are traitors to the noble cause of radical change, naive dupes, if not active collaborators, of American Intelligence. In Cummings' excitable imagination, the CIA directs a sinister and international conspiracy that perpetuates U.S. domination of the world. Under every bed, he sees a CIA agent—where there *should* be a good communist.

Nothing in Cummings' indictment is likely to occasion undue alarm among reasonable people. But these same people may be disturbed by what he counts as evidence, particularly in view of his outspoken opposition to McCarthyism and all its works and ways. Lowenstein, he states categorically, joined the CIA in 1962; this according to "sources." Turning to the notes, we learn that "one of these sources served with U.S. Army Intelligence. The others, also with backgrounds in intelligence work, are close to the CIA." Not impressed? Neither, apparently, was Victor Marchetti, a disgruntled former CIA agent who once opined that the U.S. government is "intent upon imitating the methods of totalitarian regimes in order to maintain its already inordinate power over the American people." This impeachable source advised Cummings to "stick with the circumstantial evidence. What matters is the close association and cooperation."

But to characterize the evidence that Cummings presents as circumstantial is to be charitable indeed. It comes to this: Lowenstein loved his country and understood the nature of communist ambitions. So did agents of the CIA, or at least some of them. Ergo? In a lame effort to buttress his case, Cummings notes that Lowenstein traveled a good bit on a relatively small income. Yet he himself points out that there was a great deal of money in the Lowenstein family and that Al Lowenstein, who was very frugal, counted many friends upon whom he was wont to call for free room and board. A colleague of mine who knew Lowenstein well assures me that this was indeed the way in which the man operated. In the final analysis, then, Cummings' brief against Lowenstein is invertebrate, and he knows it. "Lowenstein's exact relationship with the CIA is vague," he concedes, "as it no doubt was meant to be, and as it was with many of their people." Or as Tailgunner Joe once explained to a skeptical Richard Rovere, the absence of evidence only serves to demonstrate how clever the communists are.

Cummings' handling of evidence—or rather lack of it—is even more surrealistic in his handling of his second, and complementary, charge: that Lowenstein was a homosexual. Not that that is so bad, mind you; like all advanced thinkers, Cummings is always careful to speak of "sexual preferences." What seems to annoy him is Lowenstein's refusal to come *out* of the closet. It seems that the liberal spook always practiced his vice (preference) *under cover*. There was, for example, the seemingly innocent wrestling matches with some of his young friends. And the smoking gun: Lowenstein went to bed with one of his male

BOOKS IN BRIEF—COUNTRY

Bluegrass: A History by Neil V. Rosenberg, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press; $24.95. An obviously definitive history of bluegrass by an amateur musician and professor of folklore, Rosenberg's useful book shares some of the failings of the genre itself—an elegant professionalism that increasingly misses the point of why people play and listen to down-home music. Still, *Bluegrass* will probably remain the standard history for the forseeable future.

Just Folks: Visitin' With Carolina People by Jerry Bledsoe, Charlotte, North Carolina: East Woods Press; $9.95. *Carolina Curiosities* by Jerry Bledsoe, Charlotte: East Woods Press; $7.95. The Tarheel State's number one booster spins yarns and explores the backroads of North Carolina in these two volumes of columns and vignettes. Anyone who has ever vacationed in North Carolina will want to refresh his memory by hearing the tales of the newspaperman Bledsoe, whom Charles Kuralt describes as "Carolina's Listener Laureate."

Country Music U.S.A. by Bill C. Malone, Austin: University of Texas Press. Bill Malone's classic history of country music is back in print in a revised and enlarged edition. They're all here—from Uncle Dave Macon and Jimmie Rodgers to Ricky Skaggs and Emmylou Harris, concluding with the timely admonition: "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?"

The Devil Went Down to Georgia by Charlie Daniels, Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers; $12.95. *Chronicles* once described Charlie Daniels as a national treasure. While these stories do not succeed as well as some of the songs that inspired them, Charlie's fundamental decency and good humor come through enough to make his simple tales more readable than most of what is passed off as short fiction.

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disciples. Or so we are told. Cummings does not cite a source, even an anonymous one. Instead, he identifies several "friends" who, after some prompting, "speculate," "believe," "hint," and hear from "the grapevine" about Lowenstein's homosexuality. Appropriately, he concludes with "a howler," remarking that Lowenstein knew that he was—how to put it?—so inclined, "but he didn't spend much time wrestling with it."

So eager is Cummings to believe every evil report about Lowenstein that he repeats Dennis Sweeney's charge that the pied piper once made physical advances to him. This, be it known, is the same Dennis Sweeney who shot Lowenstein to death in 1980 and who believed that the CIA had implanted fillings in his teeth that were addling his brain and controlling his will. Like Cummings, who professes once to have admired Lowenstein, Sweeney was a former protégé and a product of the 60's, one of the possessed who smoldered and burned "with an almost uncontrollable passion for social justice."

Compared with such men as these, Al Lowenstein appears in a favorable light. And yet it is difficult to escape the conclusion that his liberalism helped to pave the way for latter-day radicalism. In his last years, he himself seems to have sensed this, for as his friend William F. Buckley observes, he began to retreat "from the vanities of liberalism." These vanities include a weakness for a certain kind of sentimentality about (as opposed to a love for) human beings and a tendency to think abstractly. Lowenstein was always relatively indifferent to reality and to historical thinking; his confidently held views concerning South Africa, for example, were almost identical with those recently advanced by liberals who would prefer to see blood (someone else's) running in the streets of Johannesburg than to moderate the demand that full democracy be instituted immediately. Like so many liberals, he believed that unflagging devotion to abstract principle, coupled with determined effort, could remake the world, that political and social democracy would triumph over injustice and evil. Despite, however, the undeniable popular appeal of these heady notions, action predicated on them almost always results in mischief, because it is untempered by historical consciousness and by a recognition of the stubborn perversity of human volition.

Not all liberals, of course, are as naive as Lowenstein was, Walter Berns being a case in point. His essays in defense of liberal democracy are impressive not only in their want of illusion, but in their intellectual sophistication. A distinguished student of constitutional law presently associated with the American Enterprise Institute, Berns is critical of many of our most prominent public nuisances: judges who seek to transform the Constitution into a personal credo; opponents of capital punishment who "do not understand the connection between anger and justice, and between anger and human dignity"; university

IN A MOTEL PARKING LOT, THINKING OF DR. WILLIAMS

by Wendell Berry

1.
The poem is important, but
not more than the people
whose survival it serves,

one of the necessities, so they may
speak what is true, and have
the patience for beauty: the weighted

grainfield, the shady street, the
well-laid stone and the changing tree
whose branches spread above.

For want of songs and stories
they have dug away the soil,
paved over what is left,

set up their perfunctory walls
in tribute to no god,
for the love of no man or woman,

so that the good that was here
cannot be called back
except by long waiting, by great

sorrows remembered and to come,
by invoking the understones
of the world, and the vivid air.

2.
The poem is important,
as the want of it
proves. It is the stewardship

of its own possibility,
the past remembering itself
in the presence of

the present, the power, learned
and handed down, to see
what is present

and what is not: the pavement
laid down and walked over
regardlessly—by exiles, here

only because they are passing.
Oh, remember the oaks that were
here, the leaves, purple and brown,

falling, the nuthatches walking
headfirst down the trunks,
crying *"onc! onc!"* in the brightness

as they are doing now
in the cemetery across the street
where the past and the dead

keep each other. To remember,
to hear and remember, is to stop
and walk on again

to a livelier, surer measure.
It is dangerous
to remember the past only

for its own sake, dangerous
to deliver a message
that you did not get.

Wendell Berry lives on a 75-acre farm in Henry County, Kentucky. His volumes of poetry include The Broken Ground, Findings, The Country of Marriage, *and* The Wheel. *He is also author of* The Unsettling of America *and* The Gift of Good Land.

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professors who do not wish to give so much as the appearance of being out of step with the times; and 60's radicals who claimed immunity for their law-breaking by virtue of their opposition to the war in Vietnam.

Having done time at the United Nations, Berns is also instructive on the inanities of pacifism and on Russian shamelessness. And he presents a coherent and convincing argument in defense of censorship, that most maligned of civilization's champions. That being said, it is also true that he is quintessentially liberal in his reliance on abstract reasoning. To take only the most obvious example, he insists that the Constitution can be distinguished from its interpretation. With John Marshall, he argues that "the times, to the extent possible, must be kept in tune with the Constitution"—not vice versa. Given the ideological enthusiasms of Justices such as Douglas, Brennan, and Thurgood Marshall, there is something to be said for this position. But it cannot stand the test as a permanent project. The Constitution is not, and it cannot be, an 18th-century document; rather, it is a body of interpretation, the record of a people's *historical* decisions. In 1954, for example, it was not the case that the Supreme Court suddenly awoke from its dogmatic slumber to find that the Constitution prohibited "separate but equal" facilities for blacks and whites. Instead, it was that the weight of American opinion had shifted decisively in favor of integration.

Berns's penchant for abstraction ought not to come as a surprise, for he is a disciple of the late Leo Strauss, a charismatic teacher for whom historical thinking was a form of nihilism. In setting forth his own philosophic position, Berns rehearses Strauss's views concerning modern natural right theory (Hobbes and Locke). He argues that the "fundamental human right" is that of self-preservation and the "fundamental law of nature," the attendant search for peace. By identifying himself with this redefinition of natural right and natural law, he seeks to sidestep the difficulties that accompany any effort to spell out the content of a higher natural law. Yet, like Strauss, he is convinced that without *some* conception of natural right, men will be left without a standard by which to judge positive law. The natural, he writes, is "that order outside the conventional according to which the conventional may be criticized."

It is, however, simply not true that the denial of natural right must lead to relativism and nihilism. We judge one law to be better than another in the same way that we judge anything—by means of comparison. We do not need an absolute right or law in order to be able to make discriminations, any more than we must show Shakespeare to be the absolute (or perfect) writer or else confess our inability to make any valid claim respecting his literary preeminence. To be sure, absolutes *are* available to those of us who credit divine revelation, but except in a community with settled—and like—religious convictions, our testimony is almost sure to fall on deaf ears. Thus, for most practical purposes, we are obliged to rely on finite—which is not to say arbitrary—comparative judgment.

Perhaps more disconcerting than Berns's abstract thinking is his belief in the essential goodness of nature, including human nature. He maintains, for example, that "voyeurism is by nature a perversion." If he means by this that a perfected nature would recoil from the practice, well and good. But if, as I think, he means that voyeurism is unnatural as men are presently constituted, he must make a better case. In the absence of the unnatural restraints imposed by civilized moral authority, such behavior appears quite spontaneously. Deciding the bent of our nature—toward good or evil—remains finally a matter of belief, but both Christianity and history argue against the Rousseauian faith that continues to inspire the radical imagination.

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Pastor to the Pariahs

by James L. Sauer

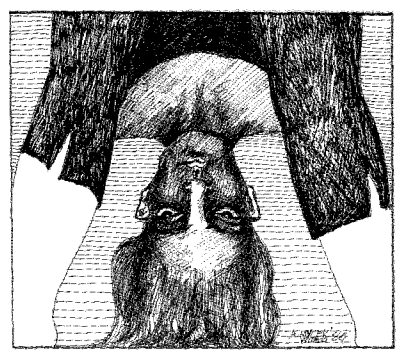
***Who Speaks For God?* by Charles Colson, Westchester, IL: Crossway.**

Dramatic conversions happen. F.F. Bruce, the noted New Testament scholar, is not alone in insisting that no one can understand Paul of Tarsus without considering his experience on the road to Damascus. And whether you believe, as Christians do, that he there met the resurrected Christ or not, all admit that he was not the same man afterward: Saul the Pharisee had become Paul the Apostle. He and twelve other men turned the world upside down. In some ways, Colson reminds me of Paul. As one of Nixon's devious minions, Colson was a Machiavellian power seeker. His only god was getting to the top. Then something happened. His world came crashing down. Conversion, conviction, incarceration. And his witness stood. Since those post-Watergate days, his Prison Fellowship has gone quietly on its way serving the sociopath lepers of our prisons.

Devotional literature is seldom discussed at cocktail parties; nor is it common to find books of Christian exhortation discussed in "official" America. God, after all, is a leper also. One TV interviewer told Colson seconds before airtime: "We'll talk today only about prisons; it's against station policy to mention God on the air." Controversial issues like sex-change operations, bestiality, and the Supreme Being should be left to professionals like Phil Donahue. Colson didn't listen: He preached Christ.

That is why most leaders of modern culture will regard *Who Speaks For God?* with indifference, if not hostility. Solzhenitsyn's pronouncements on Western decadence now elicit similar responses among the chic, while Mother Teresa's attacks on abortion are tolerated with respectful bemusement. Prophets are fun to listen to at first; then as their relentless truth hammers at our sins, they become an embarrassment. Colson, the ex-Watergater, full of *mea culpas*, always got press; Colson, the prison minister who preaches sin, redemption, and life in Christ, is a pariah. He has gone beyond entertainment; now he's "meddlin'."

Colson is not easily classified. He is a well-educated lawyer, a man whose conversion experience came through reading C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. His writing style is clear, rational, and theologically comprehensible. His fundamental base of knowledge rests on biblical inerrancy—the Protestant equivalent of papal infallibility, and hardly a liberal position. Yet his level of compassion would match any liberal's, and his commonsense application of the gospel would please any Fundamentalist. He is the evangelical man for all seasons whose work in word and deed



compels us to listen whether he is speaking of AIDS or prison reform, balanced budgets or personal forgiveness.

Colson's wholesale denunciation of success theology—the Evangelical sell-out to the values of the dollar and the tube—is a refreshing sign of spiritual vigor. The older success theology used to count souls; the new one counts votes, mailing lists, Nielson ratings, and war chests. In contrast, Colson champions the orthodox theology of obedience. Success in the Kingdom of Heaven may well require failure in the kingdom of men. Augustine said the same.

James L. Sauer is the director of the library at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pennsylvania.

The Maze of Metaphor

by Stephen L. Tanner

***American Poetics of History: From Emerson to the Moderns* by Joseph G. Kronick, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.**

Jacques Derrida has in recent years made himself one of the most influential figures in literary criticism on American college campuses. The movement he has inspired, alternately known as "deconstruction" or "post-structuralism," asserts that all language is metaphorical and that there is nothing outside the literary text. Following Derrida's lead, Joseph G. Kronick challenges the traditional concepts of literary history and study and focuses on metaphor to create an alternative understanding of tradition and history. The "American poetics of history" he propounds is the personal and metaphorical creation of the group of American writers he examines. History in these terms is "a troping of the tropes that constitute history." History, argues Kronick, is simply a "question of intertextuality, or reading and writing." In other words, "nature and the past do not exist outside of language: history is generated by metaphors or representation." We must recognize "the irreducible metaphoricity of any notion of origins or centers."

If this notion of history as literary play strikes you as peculiar or even perverse, you are still clinging to traditional humanistic assumptions that language can have determinate meaning and refer to things outside the realm of language itself. I confess to being a victim of such retrograde assumptions, and reading the chapters in this book on Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman—writers to whose lives and works I have devoted considerable study—is like entering a pale, surrealistic world of abstraction in which these writers are barely recognizable.

Making frequent use of Derrida, Paul de Man, Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, and other contemporary literary the-

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orists, Kronick portrays Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Henry Adams, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, and Wallace Stevens as deconstructionists and then deconstructs them. The book is an encyclopedia of the jargon terms of poststructuralism and a showpiece of the kind of incomprehensible sentences that radical theorists delight in. Here is his thesis statement from the introduction: "A poetics of history shifts the ground of historical studies from epistomology to tropology, the rhetorical interplay that poses history as a problematic of reading wherein temporal relations are generated by a linguistic process of exchange." At this point he is just easing us into the idiom.

Later we must cope with sentences like this: "Introjection promises a synthesis of preservation and negation that it cannot fulfill; at this juncture, incorporation, a 'fantasmic' and 'unmediated' process, intervenes." Or try: "Reading, or the struggle of reappropriation and exclusion (introjection), is facilitated by forgetfulness. Forgetting frees us to reappropriate what we have rejected. And forgetting is a preserving and negating par excellence." Still looking for more? "The economic topos of a primordial gnosis passed from father to son in chronological succession cannot control the entropic force of writing, which can never overcome the chaos of its indeterminable history." When to this idiom Kronick adds a sprinkling of Freudianism, we get statements like this about Thoreau's first book: "But by writing, he gains the mastery of the pen, which we might call a phallus, and in rewriting history, he inscribes his own origin. The master of the pen/phallus becomes his own father."

How appalling it is that a writer who uses language in these ways insists that there is no reality outside of language. "Reality," he says, "earns its name by being written in a book, for only when the event is documented can we recognize it as truth." Elsewhere he informs us that "the position one has relative to the universe is determined by language." And language cannot refer to things or events in a real world because "the thing language communicates is always language itself." Consequently "the poet is no longer the namer of nature, man, and spirit; instead, he is a reader of texts, at once the assembler and the dissembler of fragments."

The irony in all this, of course, is that the claim that language is everything in reality trivializes language and literary study. Kronick's book is symptomatic of what is happening to literary study in our universities. In graduate programs and conferences of literature professors, poststructuralism is the fashionable approach and, for some, a new orthodoxy. It serves to widen the gap between criticism and the educated reader and between the humanities and the general public.

Stephen L. Tanner is professor of English at Brigham Young University.

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California Monologue

by Martin Morse Wooster

The Outer Coast **by Richard Batman, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; $18.95.**

Author of one previous history of the American West, Richard Batman has attempted in *The Outer Coast* to provide a history of foreigners in California from the founding of the first mission in 1769 until the attempted annexation of Monterey by a drunken American Navy captain in 1842, which, in Batman's eyes, marked the end of California's isolation from the world.

On the surface, Batman has prepared an exciting tale. How could any book with guest appearances by Daniel Boone, Captain James Cook, Jedediah Smith, and dozens of hard-living fur trappers, ship captains, merchant bankers, and other worthies be dull?

But Batman overcomes all obstacles and achieves boredom nonetheless by never allowing any of his characters to speak in their own voices. Perhaps this is because most of the admittedly obscure adventurers Batman chronicles did not leave any journals or letters worth citing. I suspect the real reason is that Batman prefers his own voice to those of the explorers he chronicles. Here, for example, is Batman's account of the return of Captain Cook's crew to London after Cook's death in 1779:

> Officers and sailors were paid off and went their separate ways to spread tales and legends of the South Seas, of Hawaii, of the west coast of America, of the Arctic, of Kamchatka, and of China. Wherever they went—to the drawing rooms of London society or to the sailors' bars on the waterfront—they took with them the same stories.

What were these stories? Were any of them preserved? Did the sailors invent tales as fantastic as those of Herodotus or Sir John Mandeville? We do not know. All we know is that Batman's tone-deaf technique has glossed over what, to me, should be a tantalizing piece of information.

The best histories, like the best novels, are means of giving voice to ages and times now lost to us. Batman methodically silences past voices in favor of his own. Batman's explorers and *alcaldes* are reduced to the lifelessness

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of the emperors in Byzantine chronicles. Even Daniel Boone, shoehorned into this history despite never having traveled within 1,500 miles of California, is reduced from being an authentic American hero to a quizzical old grouch.

It is only when Richard Henry Dana enters the scene two-thirds of the way through the book that Batman's tableaux momentarily comes to life. Dana is a very empathetic figure, a Harvard graduate who decided, after devouring too many books, to sign on board a whaler on a voyage from Boston around Cape Horn to California and back.

Dana described his travels in *Two Years Before the Mast*, one of the earliest and best accounts of American exploration. When Batman paraphrases Dana, he is on solid ground. When he leaves Dana's adventures, his footing is much less sure, except for one memorable scene in which a wandering fur trapper named Antoine Robidaux travels to a small town in Missouri in 1840 to urge farmers, for the first time, to cross 2,000 miles of uncharted wasteland for the golden land of California. Robidaux "said there was but one man in California that ever had a chill there, and it was a matter of so much wonderment to the people of Monterey that they went eighteen miles to the country just to see him shake."

It is touchstones such as this that make popular history worthwhile by allowing us, for a moment, to glimpse into the past and see it fresh and whole. These moments occur so rarely in Batman's work that I can't recommend *The Outer Coast*. I hope, however, that more gifted writers will emerge to till the same fields as Batman. The history of our nation is much too important to be left to the Marxists and the mathematicians.

Martin Morse Wooster is Washington editor of Harper's *magazine.*

Flightless Bird

by Brian Murray

***Galápagos* by Kurt Vonnegut, New York: Delacorte; $16.95.**

Many see in Kurt Vonnegut a menace to society. Since the late 1960's, parents' groups and school boards in several states have launched drives to keep *Slaughterhouse Five* and other Vonnegut novels out of libraries and off syllabi.

Other observers regard Kurt Vonnegut as a writer of consistent intelligence and integrity—a titan of his age. For every Vonnegut hater there are probably five avid Vonnegut fans, perhaps most of whom are high school and college students who also believe that *Star Trek* is high art and that Henry James was a trumpet player who led his own big band back in the 40's. These devotees will tell you, quite earnestly, that Vonnegut is a certified Deep Thinker and that several of his books—including *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse Five*—are among the most important of our time.

Vonnegut is a religious skeptic; his political views—such as they are—veer left. He is certainly liberal with the sort of snide cracks and scatological jokes that one associates with boys of 13. But he is not as sinister as his most severe critics contend. In essays and interviews, Vonnegut has spoken with pride of the Purple Heart he earned during World War II; of his successful rearing of six children and his own upbringing in a large family with firm Midwestern roots; of the fact that "I have earned whatever I own by hard work." In the main, Vonnegut's novels call for nothing worse than the spread of neighborly goodwill and an end to the worship of machinery; his satirical jabs are sometimes right on the mark. Consider, for example, his 1968 essay "Yes, We Have No Nirvanas"—a funny, incisive exposé of the then very trendy Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

Of course, Vonnegut's disciples overrate him greatly; he is not a modern-day Mark Twain. *Slaughterhouse Five* might endure, but in the year 2010 Vonnegut's other novels will probably be considered no better known than Carl Van Vechten's are today. Indeed, Vonnegut's novels have become progressively less readable: such works as *Slapstick* (1976) and *Deadeye Dick* (1982) exhibit the sort of sloppy predictability that is common among writers who recognize that even their most trivial scribblings will be quickly consumed by a constituency of largely uncritical fans.

Galápagos, Vonnegut's most recent novel, contains a couple of amusing scenes and some clever verbal constructions. James Wait, a principal character, is a con man with skin the color of "the crust on a pie in a cheap cafeteria." In Guayaquil, Ecuador, he stays at a hotel with "the proportions and mood of a glassfront bookcase, high and wide and shallow."

Much of the novel is set in Guayaquil and on the Galápagos Islands made famous by Darwin; down where it is "hotter than the hinges of hell."

But on the whole, *Galápagos* is a dog's dinner of precious tricks and comic-strip philosophizing. Essentially Vonnegut argues that human beings have made a mess of the world because—through an evolutionary quirk—we wound up with brains too large to serve any truly useful purpose; that we'd all be far better off if we had flippers and fins and spent our days flopping around the seashore with the walruses and the seals. Irritating, too, is the condescending and rather cloying narrative voice that Vonnegut once again employs. In *Galápagos*, Vonnegut often sounds a bit too much like Miss Frances sing-songing her way through a science lesson at the Ding Dong School. Listen to this description of the "flightless cormorant":

> This bird was black and appeared to be the size of a large duck, but it had a neck as long and as supple as a snake. The queerest thing about it, though, was that it seemed to have no wings, which was almost the truth. This sort of bird was endemic to the Galápagos Islands, meaning that it was found there and nowhere else on the planet. Its wings were tiny and folded flat against its body, in order that it might swim as fast and as deep as a fish could.

In the early 70's, when he was at the peak of his popularity, Vonnegut announced that he would write no more novels. After reading—or trying to read—*Galápagos*, many will be sorry that he reneged on his promise.

Brian Murray is professor of English at Youngstown State University.

Redeemer Novel

by Carl C. Curtis

***Honorable Men* by Louis Auchincloss, Boston: Houghton Mifflin; $15.95.**

Some years ago Ernest Tuveson argued in his landmark study *Redeemer Nation* that our country's Puritan background has led it through a series of historical crusades—from Indian wars to Vietnam—to bring righteousness to a corrupt world. It's an interesting idea, disturbing and perhaps perverse, that deserves more attention than it has

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gotten. Tuveson's study leads the reader to consider what happens when a country, which began its history motivated by the belief that faith in God required men to perform righteous acts, loses its faith but retains its zeal. One possibility is that it will continue to act with a fervent confidence in its own purity even as it loses its formerly sound foundation and clear purpose. That may describe the history of America and suggest why our country must regain something of its earlier self, however modified, if it is to survive in a world where other empires act with equal or superior zeal and deadly serious purpose.

Tuveson's argument kept popping in and out of my mind as I read Louis Auchincloss' latest novel, *Honorable Men*. Not that the novel is a perfect fictional form for its themes. Auchincloss' method of dual narration (first person in some chapters, third person in others) distracts rather than facilitates the narrative, and the novel-ending conversion of the protagonist, Chip Benedict, from his errant ways is less than convincing.

Yet elements of Tuveson's arguments are effectively realized in *Honorable Men*—whether in spite of or because of the author's intentions, I cannot say. These elements emerge in the character of Chip Benedict and the America he represents. The Vietnam War introduced America to a group of leaders who had lost all moral clarity. Confident, technically minded wizards, Robert McNamara and the rest of David Halberstam's best and brightest were men with no inkling that their enemies might be evil men representing an alien, destructive ideology. Their efforts rested on nothing more substantial than their personal wills and the taxpayers' money; as soon as one or the other ran dry, the game was up, leaving a bewildered group of men who never possessed the virtue and foresight necessary to shoulder the burden they tried to carry.

Honorable Men paints a fuzzy but still memorable picture of a man who, according to the fiction, rises to become a member of this unfortunate cadre. Chip Benedict is rigid and willful—almost religious in his dedication to whatever goal consumes him at a given time. But religiosity of that kind is not faith, and it is precisely what makes Chip dangerous. He serves with a tenacious spirit in World War II and works in the State Department during Vietnam with equal resolve. But throughout his career he never understands what his friend and career naval officer Gerald Hastings tries to tell him, that it's not simply an enemy but the enemy's state of mind, his beliefs, that ought to be hated. Lacking this understanding, Chip can only play at being what Hastings is, a patriot and (in his own peculiar way) a redeemer.

As our liberal century has progressed from one debacle to another, men have prayed for their righteous causes—without believing in God. Gus Leighton, friend to Chip's wife, Alida, spots the problem in Chip early on when he warns her of the dangers of his "rigidity" once divorced from faith. "What I suppose I'm trying to say," he says, "is that if you scrap Christ, you'd better scrap the whole business of religion and take your chances with reason." In other words, the redeemer manqué, not the Redeemer, is America's bane.

Auchincloss may not realize what he has said, but if *Honorable Men* carries any lasting point, it is that the generation of men who governed America for the larger part of this century have never acted in the service of any noble cause, because the very terms under which nobility might obtain did not exist for them. The Cavalier Lovelace understood well that he could not love Lucasta, loved he not honor more. Truly honorable men know—as Chip Benedict does not—that they cannot love honor or be honorable if they do not love something else, something infinitely superior, more. Whether that something should or should not be acknowledged both publicly and privately is the subject of the burning debate of our time, one on which the fate of the West hinges.

Carl C. Curtis is assistant professor of English at Liberty University.

BOOKS IN BRIEF—RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The First Theologians **by Charles W. Lowry, Chicago: Gateway.** ***Churches on the Wrong Road,*** **edited by Stanley Atkins and Theodore McConnell, Chicago: Gateway.** Lowry recounts the battle fought by the earliest Christian theologians against the gnostic belief that the earth was diabolical; Atkins and McConnell have assembled 10 distinguished observers (including Russell Kirk, John Howard, and Gerhart Niemeyer) who fear that many churches now recognize nothing holier than terrestrial politics.

Philosophy Through the Looking Glass: Language, Nonsense, Desire **by Jean-Jacques Lecercle, La Salle, IL: Open Court.** The French passion for new theories of language has taken them, literally, to the madhouse, where Lecercle analyzes the "reflective delirium . . . created by talented patients."

A Chesterton Anthology, **edited by P.J. Kavanagh, San Francisco: Ignatius.** A rich sampling of the journalism, poetry, and fiction of the worthy adversary of H.G. Wells and Bernard Shaw.

Disintering Détente

by Michael Warder

The Soviet Paradox: External Expansion, Internal Decline **by Seweryn Bialer, New York: Alfred A. Knopf; $21.95.**

The Soviet Union has reached the peak of its military power by reducing its economy to a shambles. If it continues to lavish its resources on the military, the economy will further decline, eventually imperiling the military budget. If the Soviets shift investment to the civilian economy, less money will remain for guns. If the Politburo permits significant economic reform through decentralization and free markets, the effect on Eastern Europe, China, and other communist countries would politically destabilize the Soviet Empire. The Soviets are stuck and will probably try to improve the existing system rather than reform it. Soviet leaders have no option but to continue to rely upon the same cold-war rhetoric so often used to galvanize the citizenry into action. Such is the general thesis of *The Soviet Paradox* by Seweryn Bialer.

Bialer is, in some ways, as perplexing as the Soviet Union itself. A leading Sovietologist and director of the Research Institute for Internal Change at Columbia University, he has written a comprehensive and lucid book on Soviet domestic and foreign policy. Based on the latest research of a wide variety of Sovietologists, his major conclusions are measured and insightful. Chapters on the dynamics of leadership, successsion, and the problems of systemic reform are especially illuminating. Now and then, though, the author lapses into statements that suggest that he has

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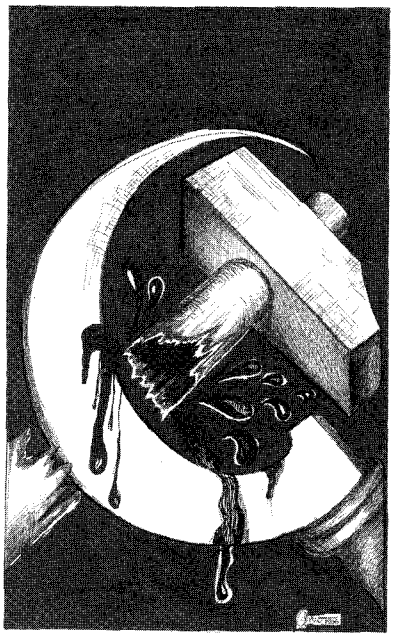

perhaps taken one too many trips to Moscow.

In a chapter on "Assumptions and Perceptions," Bialer writes: "Unlike the Nazis, the Soviets do not want war with their adversaries. They do not propagandize or glorify offensive military action as the means by which to achieve their international goals." If Afghanistan, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and those annual November military parades through Red Square do not evidence a Soviet eagerness for war, they make clear, at least, that they want peace on their own terms. But that's all Hitler said *he* wanted. Elsewhere, Bialer discusses recent Soviet military adventures—which makes his assertion about Soviet reluctance for war all the more curious.

Even more dubious is Bialer's assertion that "in Stalin's day true believers could and did excuse and accept the cruelty, viciousness, and oppressiveness of the Soviet construction of socialism as long as they believed that it represented the extreme and unique birth pangs of a better world." Stalin's henchmen were probably not so idealistic. The evidence indicates they were terrified that if they did not torture and execute with sufficient enthusiasm, they themselves and their families would become victims. The theory that Stalin had to be cruel to modernize and improve the Soviet Union was never provable, and 68 years after the Revolution, the Soviet Union is still a comparatively primitive and backward country.

Like other commentators, Bialer favorably describes Mikhail Gorbachev as "suave, witty, and vigorous." Bialer says nothing about the lapses in Comrade Gorbachev's suavity when asked in public about the plight of Jews in the Soviet Union. Bialer's favorable assessment of Gorbachev similarly fails to explain why the Soviet leader so crudely mishandled the Chernobyl disaster. And Gorbachev still prefers to subject political troublemakers to forced psychiatric imprisonment rather than impale them on a witty *bon mot*.

Bialer discusses the American policy of détente, which some analysts date to May of 1972 with the signing of Salt I and the Agreement on Basic Principles of Relations. Like most, Bialer believes détente was dead by 1979 with the invasion of Afghanistan, and really dead with the 1981 imposition of martial law in Poland. But arguably, détente died as early as the October War of 1973 between Egypt and Israel, when we learned that at the time the Soviets signed Salt I they were preparing the Egyptians for war against Israel. Or you could date the death of détente in December of 1974 with the passage of the Stevenson Amendment on the Export-Import Bank Bill limiting loans to the Soviets for the next four years. The fall of Vietnam in April of 1975, the introduction of Cuban troops in Angola in late 1975, the Soviet airlift to Ethiopia in the fall of 1977, and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December of 1978 all belied any meaningful sense of détente—though Bialer would, implausibly, like to see a sobered version of the policy revived.

Bialer believes that "the age of ideological crusades, with their high level of emotionalism and self-righteousness, is over, at least for the great powers." Specialists on the Soviet Union have been saying this for 30 years, and yet even a cursory look at the latest Party Program shows that the Soviets still zealously defend their system as legitimate and attack ours as illegitimate. Bialer himself admits that worsening domestic circumstances will force party leaders to employ ideological rhetoric to inspire new economic sacrifices. Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan has again dared to label the "evil empire" and champion distinctively American values in foreign policy.

In a work that stresses Soviet economic problems, Bialer incredibly claims that "hunger in the Soviet Union has been abolished." That statement must warm the heart of the Soviet host for Bialer's many Moscow visits. From available documents, we know that rickets, a disease caused by vitamin deficiency—virtually unknown in the U.S.—is widespread and was found in two out of every five dead infants in the Soviet Union in the mid-1970's. The Soviet infant mortality rate runs three times higher than the American rate. Why are all those well-fed babies dying?

Bialer blames the Reagan Administration for the "deterioration" in U.S.-USSR relations. Reagan's harsh rhetoric was "impossible for the [Soviet] leaders and elites to swallow, especially as they followed so suddenly upon a decade of civility." The Vietnamese, Ethiopians, Afghans, and Angolans share a keen appreciation for the civility of the 70's.

To improve U.S.-Soviet relations, Bialer proposes more regular communication and exchanges at all levels from summits on down to the little people "on the basis of strict reciprocity." This will be difficult, since by making nongovernmental exchanges equal, all private groups from the U.S. would have to be controlled, staffed, and led by the CIA, a comparatively small and benign organization when compared with the KGB.

This is an important book in many respects, but one can't help but think Bialer has been at the Soviet exchange trough too many times. He must be perpetually applying for the next Soviet visa and wondering how his scholarship will play in Moscow.

Michael Warder is director of public affairs for The Rockford Institute.

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Letter From Wisconsin

by David Tillotson

Dan Rather's Troubled Land

If it did nothing else, the farm depression of the mid-80's has demonstrated that our current agricultural leadership is simply not quick enough to deal with all the monkey wrenches in a politician's tool box. This is not surprising, since farm people are used to waiting and adjusting to growing seasons, to slower things, while the politicians contrive and connive with both eyes fixed on tomorrow's headlines.

At least in the short run, politicians are nimble enough to manipulate farm boys (and girls) at will. Pegs on the cribbage board.

One of the television's favorite farm ladies, a Mrs. Massey of Dodgeville, Wisconsin, told WMAQ radio in Chicago that people sending help to her family (after Tom Brokaw publicized their forced bankruptcy sale) "are angry with the government for letting this happen to our farmers." Letting this happen?

When the farmers asked for lower taxes, Wisconsin Governor Anthony Earl—a quintessential Midwestern politician—responded by calling in the media and heading out into hip-deep January snow to "pick corn." And a few years back, when farmers asked for "God's Time" and a stronger voice in the legislature, the politicians gave them daylight saving, gerrymandering, and a vote for the numerous urban 18-year-olds. For more sauce on the pudding they changed the tax laws, brought in new assessors with new formulas, and reassessed the farmers. Farm taxes skyrocketed. Yet when rural land values plummeted 50 percent between 1980 and 1985, the lawmakers never got around to ordering another reassessment.

But there were conferences, mental health gatherings, hot lines, pamphlets, and politically sponsored "rap sessions" all over the rural boondocks. And while these things are as chancy as a lotto ticket for the farmers who expect some payoff, they are potential winners for those with the right political agendas.

Farm Bureau protests have been mere whispers in the wind. Poorly organized tax revolters went down like dominoes.

But newcomers like American Agriculture and Farm Unity Alliance, and old standbys, like the National Farm Organization and the Farmers Union are rediscovering the attractions of the "Command Economy." Because these farm-labor organizations were so thoroughly politicized, they were easily "understood" by the left and quickly welcomed as part of the centralizers' agrarian chorus.

When on February 24-28 Dan Rather and CBS sojourned to selected hustings to hear about *Trouble on the Land* from "the farm people themselves," farmers were mostly silent. Larger forces, "La Forza del Destino," many of them in one way or another propelled by the disproportionate power (and wages) of Big Labor, have crowded into the limelight, and so far few politicians have dared label them as part of the farm problem. It was painful to watch as Dan and the farmers he selected for interviews skirted the subject.

Viewers were told that even agribusiness yuppies with $100,000 tractors and combines and 5,000-acre operations considered themselves the victims of government loan agencies, banks, and the Secretary of Agriculture. Something unspoken, beyond reason, something ideological must be operating here.

On Monday Dan told us about an Iowa couple in hock for $600,000; in contrast, on Tuesday Dan showcased a successful rancher from Strasburg, Colorado. Left undiscussed were the reasons—except for sheer size—for the success of the Colorado ranch: Was it overpumping of aquifers? "Free" irrigation water? Instead, we were given threadbare snatches of Thomas Jefferson's views, a one-liner from Hawkeye poet Paul Engle, a bucolic glimpse at Grant Wood and other landscapers.

Wednesday there were statistics on foreclosures and liquidations in LBJ country; Thursday, it was another success story, with California computers keeping herd on 1,600 cows, while hi-tech vineyards likewise flourish. No mention on Thursday's program of massive tax subsidies for the water projects that benefit Western agribusinessmen, nor of how these subsidies hurt agricultural competitors in the riparian Eastern states and create new crop surpluses.

Dan introduced us to a young couple from Everly, Iowa (CBS never tires of Iowa, our Midwest Massachusetts), who are prospering because they borrowed big at a propitious moment (with help from parents), and to a second couple who are going under because they did the opposite.

On Friday Dan left Odybolt, Iowa, but listened in as other tall-corn activists warned that the day was coming when it would be "us against them." One rural woman declared they "weren't going to take it anymore." Goodbye, goodbye, to American pie.

A "command economy" is in the works and on Tom Harkin's desk.

It doesn't have to come to this, but the mindless momentum and reckless rhetoric of an election year are building up storms of ominous statistics and farm-belt hyperbole. No one, it seems,

has the time or the ability to sort things out, to encompass and consider much that's new.

It isn't *just* interest rates and farm credit policies as Dan Rather suggested on his first segment of *Trouble on the Land*. It's a hundred other things short-shrifted by the six o'clock bunch:

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It's the weather in Brazil and Argentina; Soviet and Asian grain buying schedules; the Green Revolution and the shrinking gene pool.

It's Common Market subsidies for European farmers who export to the U.S.

It's the obligation to practice conservation on the land—to be a steward as well as a "bottom line" believer. It's the Ralph Nader scare tactics which scare the hell out of consumers.

It's the chemical and agribusiness companies that never get scared when they ought to be.

It's a popular mind-set that assumes that cheap food can be easily produced without lethal chemicals and their occasional consequences.

It's the ecological ignorance of commentators like Dick Gregory, who think the High Plains should be parceled out to the have-not multitudes.

It's the mayor and the city council who give lip service to "green space" but whose tax, spend, and growth policies have made life impossible for a farmer at the edge of town.

It's the costs for everything the farmer or rancher must buy. And it's the taxes!

It's the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Irving R. Levine trotting out their well-publicized "food basket" follies (comparing the cost of a basket of staple food this year with what that same basket cost the consumer last year) without ever comparing the changing *labor* costs for these baskets of food. And we are never informed how much more it costs to build a tractor or a combine this year compared to last.

Escalated taxes and galloping farm costs—especially the labor costs—and low commodity prices are driving the farmers off the land, and they don't have the political clout to stop it.

But like the welfare moms who can't stop doing it, they got themselves in a bind of their own years back (precisely 50 according to John Block) when they assumed USDA planners had good long-range answers. Bringing political foxes in to rearrange the hen house was just asking for trouble.

Even so, many of them, especially Farm Bureau diehards, remain unabashedly entrepreneurial. But in the current *Zeitgeist*, these old loyalists find themselves defending eroding islands of free enterprise within a vast stream of subsidized collectivists with whom they are forced into an uneven kind of competition.

Some now argue that if there is to be no cap on costs, no limit on what the farmer has to pay for all the things he must buy, it is only fair, even logical, for him to put no cap on the price of food to the consumer. And if Congress can mandate a wage, why can't it mandate a fair price for the things the farmer sells? Though it leaks like a sieve, this is the rationale that has begun to energize "union thinking" among once-conservative farmers across the country.

As if the farmer didn't need another wild card in the wild game in which he now finds himself, entertainers, sports personalities, and airline pilots are suddenly buying the place down the road: Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, Peter Fonda, Warren Spahn, lawyers, doctors, writers, editors—"farmers" all. The baseball star hauling down a million a year for pitching 30 games is out there in the off-season on his ranch, driving up the assessments of newly real-estated farmland for hapless neighbors who must live on crops the farm produces. Even things as inconsequential as professional sports are working their way into the multifaceted "farm problem."

So Dan, we want you to know that we saw you and heard you. But next time we want something more profound, broad-scale, thoughtful, so we will know that you heard us—all of us.

David Tillotson is a working farmer in Lake Mills, Wisconsin.

Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

Price Supports & Poetic Justice

Next winter it's Phoenix or Honolulu for me, courtesy of the Writers' Set-Aside payment I'll be getting from my Uncle Sam.

The program—a brilliant idea, if you ask me—started with farmers, of course, getting paid to let certain fields lie fallow or to give up certain crops for a time because the market couldn't support any more wheat or sunflowers; farmers weren't getting paid their "target price," set somehow, by someone, in Washington. Many countries now grow huge quantities of high-quality grain, thanks to U.S. imperialist intervention, aid, and instruction: even India exports wheat now—and they don't need ours badly enough to pay the prices U.S. exporters seem determined to charge (our farmers aren't peasants and won't work for peasant pay). As a result, a sinful amount of U.S. grain rots in silos and elevators every year.

In order to make this country a little hungrier, so such crops *will* sell at a good price, farmers hold land out of production (an age-old tactic that *works*) and—this is the great, astonishing part—get *paid* not to plant those crops. "No, it's not a grant or a loan," one Midwestern supervisor told me, "it's a *payment* for *being involved in the program.*" Sort of a guaranteed allowance for promising to not mow the lawn.

Well, the crop I raise is written words, and writers feed the world's soul if not its belly. We supply one of humankind's most precious commodities; in fact, written language is one of the things that *makes* us human. It also simplifies just about every function of modern daily life. In short, writing is inestimably valuable.

On the other hand, there is a word glut so omnipresent and immense that words have almost *no* value these days. (Of *course* this is confusing: it's *economics.*) Our enemies won't, and our own country and poor friends can't, consume all the words U.S. writers produce in various forms: magazines, newsletters, books, individual poems

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and stories and articles, doctoral theses, newspapers. . . . Why, this very article will be read by only 2.78 percent of the people for whom it is intended! And think of all the private communications and the diaries, desk drawers, trunks, and warehouses full of words that will never find a publisher. They add up to one thing: hard times for writers.

Because of the current word glut, I can't make a decent living at my chosen profession. I'm forced to hold what my family calls "a job," although, as any writer will tell you, what I do from eight to five at the office, even though I'm the boss, can't begin to match the mental muscularity and perseverance demanded of my evening and weekend word-husbandry. Because of the greed of other word-makers who have flooded the market with their inferior products, I am, in effect, forced to hold down *two* full-time jobs: one because it's gratifying and a joy to me, and the other because we have a house payment to make each month. On top of this, I'm expected to be a good wife and involved citizen. It's discouraging and unfair, and I get tired.

So I am volunteering to stop writing for one year. Not altogether, just certain kinds of things: say, poetry (my favorite, a high-yielding crop, but each poem I write adds to the most insidious and unmanageable tangle since leafy spurge met pigweed in midfield) and short stories (I've never finished one, but I spend a lot of valuable words trying). Dairy producers are the beneficiaries of a terrific program whereby they receive money after they promise to give up *all* dairy activity for five years, even selling the whole herd for slaughter. But I'm not so committed to my craft and convinced of its usefulness that I could burn everything I've written up to now and walk away from it for that long. I *am* willing to cut back a little, though.

I've been paying income tax for years but have never received those lovely cash paybacks that other Americans seem to get. Well, I've finally found a program I fit into, perfectly. My writing's grown relatively prolific in some areas, and I think the Feds will find my offer—to set aside my Selectric for a year—appealing. Naturally, I'll have to be paid *my* "target price," what I'm worth, what I *should* have been making all along (based on talent and hard work) and *would* be making if I weren't forcing my words into an already oversubsidized (with my own tax dollars) and bloated market. I won't be unreasonable: a hundred grand for the year, I've decided, will do nicely.

Jane Greer's poetry sabbatical would have to begin after *her first book of poems is published by Harry Duncan's Cummington Press this summer.*

Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

Poetic Gems

> *"Alas, for the South! Her*
> *books have grown fewer—*
> *She never was much given to*
> *literature."*

. . . Thus, South Carolina's J. Gordon Coogler—"the last bard of Dixie, at least in the legitimate line," as H.L. Mencken put it in his scathing essay "Sahara of the Bozart." Mencken's essay has by now introduced several generations of readers to the Songbird of Dixie. No doubt many of those readers have assumed that Mencken made him up, but he did not: the Bard of the Congaree was all too real, the author of *Purely Original Verse* (1897), nearly all of it every bit as lame as his immortal couplet on Southern belles lettres.

Coogler is a splendid example of what we might call a primitive poet, the verbal equivalent of the folk artists whose paintings have lately come to command critical acclaim and inflated prices.

My region boasts many others. Heck, my *state* does. I place in evidence *Nematodes in My Garden of Verse*, subtitled *A Little Book of Tar Heel Poems* and edited in 1959 by Richard Walser. Walser culled a number of these things from turn-of-the-century North Carolina newspapers which often printed their readers' verse, dealing with Presidential assassinations, train wrecks, the coming of spring, and other subjects of civic or personal interest. But the centerpiece of *Nematodes* is six poems from a little book called *Little Pansy* (1890), by the Poetissima Laureatissima [sic] of Bladen County, North Carolina, Miss Mattie J. Peterson, in whose masterwork "I Kissed Pa Twice After His Death" are found the priceless lines:

> I saw him coming, stepping
> high,
> Which was of his walk the
> way.

Perfect.

I don't know why—or even whether—the South has produced more than its share of primitive poets. Even if we do have a quantitative edge, however, this bardic tradition is not a Southern monopoly. In fact, the all-time record for sustained badness without surcease, year in and year out, a record unsurpassed and unsurpassable, must belong to a 19th-century Dundee weaver. The inimitable William McGonagall retired the cup.

A short account of McGonagall's career may have some inspirational value for those not familiar with it. In 1877, by his own account, McGonagall was seized by a "strange kind of feeling [that] seemed to kindle up my entire frame, along with a strong desire to write poetry." He promptly penned a testimonial to a local clergyman, in verse which concluded:

> My blessing on his noble form,
> And on his lofty head,
> May all good angels guard him
> while living,
> And hereafter when he's dead.

The reverend gentleman responded tactfully that "Shakespeare never wrote anything like this," and it was onward and downward thereafter for McGonagall.

There was no stopping him. He didn't take hints. When he stepped up to recite his verse in pubs, people jeered him, threw peas at him, dumped flour on him. His persistence amounted to a species of heroism, diminished only slightly by the fact that he seemed not to recognize ridicule and abuse for what it was. After the publication of his first book, *Poetic Gems*, for instance, some students wrote him a hoaxing letter from the "King of Burma" proclaiming him a "Knight of the Order of the White Elephant of Burma"; thereafter he signed himself, in perfect faith, "Sir William."

It is simply impossible to convey the

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effect produced by an entire book of McGonagall's verse. It is *all* dreadful. I swear to you that I have just now opened at random to this stanza, from a lengthy account of the Johnstown flood:

> The pillaging of the houses in
> Johnstown is fearful
> to describe,
> By the Hungarians and ghouls,
> and woe betide
> Any person or party that
> interfered with them,
> Because they were mad with
> drink, and yelling like tigers
> in a den.

There are pages and pages of this stuff.

It is estimated that a half-million copies of *Poetic Gems* have been sold since McGonagall's day—not, alas, to the profit of the author and his long-suffering wife and children. (Most recently, Templegate Publishers of Springfield, Illinois, issued a volume of selections, with an appreciative introduction by James O. Jackson.) In 1965 the BBC held a competition to find a worthy successor to McGonagall, but the judges called it off: none of the entries, they said, were in the same league.

And of course they couldn't have been. The BBC's contest was like asking people to do primitive paintings. People who paint the apotheosis of Hank Williams do not think of their work as folk art. This kind of thing can't be done tongue-in-cheek. It must be turned out in dead earnest. (And by people who ought to know better: children can write like this, and sometimes do, but the effect isn't the same at all.)

So I propose a different competition. I suggest instead that we seek McGonagallisms in the work of poets who are, or at one time were, well-regarded. Even Homer nods, and isolated passages almost as bad as the ones I've quoted have been written by people who made better livings off their verse than poor Sir William ever did.

Send me your favorites; I'll print the most awful specimens, and we'll think of a prize.

My candidate, to get things started, is from John Greenleaf Whittier's eulogy, "Randolph of Roanoke":

> Too honest or too proud to
> feign
> A love he never cherished,
> Beyond Virginia's border line
> His patriotism perished.

True, it scans, and the rhymes aren't bad. But you must admit that it has that Coogleresque quality, that Petersonian *je ne sais quoi*. William McGonagall would not have been ashamed of it.

Send your entries to John Shelton Reed at 126 Mallette Street, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514, in an envelope marked "Poetic Gems."

VITAL SIGNS

SCREEN

Paying and Praying on the Old Homestead

by E. Christian Kopff

Farming "will remain the same though Dynasties pass," thought Thomas Hardy. In our own day, the farmer is beginning to be treated like an endangered species, a poor moulting bird that tenderhearted environmentalists want the government to take under its brooding wing. Hollywood became interested in him a few years ago, and a spate of movies with well-known actresses appeared almost simultaneously. The film establishment gave an Academy Award to Sally Field, and Jessica Lange won kudos from the critics. They and Sissy Spacek and Jane Fonda went to Washington to testify before congressional committees about what they felt. When it was plain that there was even less big money to be made out of farming as a film topic than as a way of life, the industry went on to other concerns. At the distance of a year or so, it may be worthwhile to step back and think about these efforts to depict an important part of America.

The films, Sally Field's *Places in the Heart*, Jessica Lange's *Country*, Sissy Spacek's *The River*, together formed an instant genre, with its own conventions and stock motifs. There was the confrontation with the banker, at first business-like, then confused by the entrance of wife and kids. There was the auction, which began calmly and then degenerated into a shouting match between auctioneer and other farmers. There was the confrontation with bad weather, rain, or tornado. There was typically a scene with a woman struggling to handle machinery and finally succeeding, a sequence handled grotesquely in *River*. Indeed, it was often hard to keep the scenes apart in one's mind, especially between *Country* and *River*. Now convention and motif are a part of all great art, but the synthetic character of these instant traditions was obvious and repulsive.

The source of the filmmakers' concern for farmers had tainted the stream. Film and television, as industries, are urban conglomerates. Their money comes from large urban companies. Scripts are written and then directed by city folk from LA or New York, as Ben Stein pointed out a few years ago. On a trip to the country, they feel like Spencer Tracy in *Bad Day at Black Rock* or Burt Reynolds in *Deliverance*: simple, straightforward souls from a peaceful, orderly city suddenly involved in the chaos and violence and dark mysteries of the rural world. That this vision bears small resemblance to reality needs little argument. It is our big cities (espe-

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cially LA and New York) that are chaotic and violent, while our rural communities live in comparative peace and order, the peace of the property owner, the natural order of the seasons. The born-and-bred city-dweller feels, no doubt naturally, more at home in the city than in the country. It is hard for him to notice the normal, and he is struck by the different, which he tends to interpret as the bizarre. The city-dweller also tends to assimilate what he does see to what he knows. This leads to some striking insights and some appalling oversights.

The most impressive insight is the vision of the modern farmer as a victim. From time immemorial the farmer has been the one independent figure in our society, as in others. He can produce his own food and clothing. He can afford independence of views and action as no trader or professional can, because he can retreat back to his own land and grow his own food. He is the archetypical free man who, in Jefferson's vision of America, was the basis of a free society. But no more. Now letters to the editor, the suicide rate, and publicity all present him as a victim. As we have concerts to raise money for starving Ethiopians, so we have concerts for the farmer. He collapses into severe depression or explodes into violent outbursts. In *River* he sells himself as a strikebreaker to nefarious urban interests. He is the puppet of forces he can neither control nor understand, whether big business in *River* or heartless bureaucrats in *Country*. He wants to die and may well kill himself. He survives even in movie fantasy only because he has a star for a wife.

The least sympathetic aspect of this vision is presented in the mandatory bank scene (in all three movies). The farmer has become a mini-Third-World country, shouting back at the banker who wants his loan repaid, reminding him that he was the one who urged the farmer to borrow the money (in several films). Wilfred Brimley in *Country* has a few just words on this attitude. The farmers hired the money, didn't they? To depict the farmer, of all people, as someone so out of touch with the rooted nature of things as to believe the slick experts on economics, a group that has not been right since 1929 (to take a year at random), is to present the modern farmer as so infantile as to be unsalvageable. It is hard to put together a consciousness-raising session for Candide.

There is little reason to doubt that these films do reflect a dismal new reality on the farms. The farmer has joined the ranks of the bank teller who cannot talk back without losing his job or the honest cop who has to watch corruption flourishing and Serpico being mugged. In the recent farm films, the banker is the farmer's friend and neighbor, but he, too, has his strings pulled by remorseless forces behind or above him, a monopolistic businessman in *River* or a ruthless bureaucrat in *Country*. The only way the banker can make things better is to quit. It is the vision of Wendell Berry's *Unsettling of America*. The farmer is a redskin, and strip-mining stands as metaphor for American big business and big government, as in Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider*.

The reason is plain to see and easy to tell. We live in a money economy. All of us, even the richest executive, depend on the artificial monthly or weekly doling out of money, not the natural creative rhythm of the land. We are all puppets of the sources of money: big business, big banks, big government. Even our freedom of speech is guaranteed only by these same sources. Inevitably we identify with the new, impotent farmer and rejoice in his or (in these movies) her rigged success against the money economy, just as we cheer Rambo and Rocky and Lou Gossett's *Iron Eagle* when they fight against socialist aggression. It is good psychological catharsis, but in our hearts we know that things do not work that way. We watch these movies in darkened theaters or on our VCR's, where it is hard to check up on us. On the job, in public, we keep our mouths shut and our noses clean.

All of us, you see, owe money to the bank or to credit card companies. We all feel frustrated at bureaucratic interference or the vagaries of a market economy which even the experts fail to explain and cannot control. In this environment the farmer has become another film version of the secretary from *Nine to Five*, the factory worker in *Modern Times*.

In each film someone fights back. In each case a woman with a family is behind it all. Here, too, is an insight that is worth savoring. The basis of salvation and renewal in the secular world is family. Business can hurt a family as it does in *Country* or even attempt to split it up, as it tries to do in *Places*. Each film, however, depicts the family as the basis for resistance to destructive and simplifying bigness.

Is family enough? Common sense would say no. Families need community; they need religion. In *River* Sissy Spacek's husband, Mel Gibson, always tries to do things on his own. An angry crowd shouting at the auctioneer fails to stop the sale of a friend's farm. Men unite only to work in a dark factory while breaking a strike—which they fail to break—or to shore up a dike against a flood, which other men, hired by the ruthless local businessman to stop them, attempt to break down. In *Country* the crowd's refusal to bid for a friend's farm does stop an auction. Only in *Places in the Heart*, however, do we see a real community at work. Rich and poor, healthy and blind, black and white work together to stop the seemingly inevitable loss of home and breaking up of community in the face of economic humiliation and racial hatred and sexual infidelity.

Places is also the only film in which religion has a significant role. The narrative is framed by a church service. It begins with a father saying grace over a meal. In the final church scene, the entire community joins in the communion service: rich and poor, black and white, quick and dead. It is only as we see the dead sharing in the communion that we understand that this scene is an allegory of the Reformed view of Paul's insistence that the Christian perceive the Body of Christ, the communion of true believers. That communion, that community, rooted in religion and protecting the family, is the true basis for the survival of home and farm. It is a powerful scene, incomprehensible to most urban Americans, Christian or not.

Religion is relegated to saying grace in the other two farm movies. As I mentioned, *Places* begins with Field's husband, a strong masculine figure, giving thanks for the family's meal.

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Women take turns in giving thanks in Jessica Lange's *Country*, significantly, since the men in the movie are either old or broken by their lack of capitalist success. In *River* Sissy Spacek has her children thank Sun and Earth for their food, the single phoniest scene in a movie reeking with phoniness. A list of reasons for success and failure could be lengthened, but in the end *River* and *Country* fail to give us a satisfying picture of the American farmer because they lack a simple and sincere picture of his religion.

The inadequacy of *River* and *Country* may best be judged by contrasting them with the rural vision portrayed in the Australian Peter Weir's *Witness*. A Pennsylvania Dutch Amish child witnesses a brutal murder in Philadelphia's Thirtieth Street Railroad Station. Harrison Ford, a detective, returns with the child and his widowed mother to the Amish country where they hide out from the murderers. The Amish have removed themselves from hedonistic, capitalist America. They are thrifty and hardworking pacifists, and they occasionally suffer from violent teenagers and rude tourists. They are free, however, and their freedom is rooted in community and religion. (They are also the one part of rural America unequivocally praised by Wendell Berry.) Again, saying grace is significant. Ford has taken mother and child to a downtown fast-food joint and is literally biting into his hamburger as the two bow their heads in silent prayer. He is frozen in embarrassment, mouth agape, staring at them. It is a funny and beautiful scene, and we are reminded of how far the urban American is from the natural response of most people, who thank God for what He has given them.

Are the rural worlds of *Witness* and *Places in the Heart* Rousseauistic fantasies? I did not find them so. They are needed reminders that our culture's future must be rooted, that the land, lovingly used and cultivated, can create culture as well as cultivation, character as well as crops. True productivity is rooted in a way of life and a way of life must have community and religion as well as family and personal success. The farmer enjoyed a short-lived success on the silver screen as the latest addition to our nation's pantheon of victims. It is not an honor he needs, just as he does not need his ersatz "rights" protected or the laws of economics turned upside down for him. We all, farmers and not, need to remember that all culture and all creativity—I do not speak of productivity—are rooted in family, work, community, religion. To feel them as alien, as many film people do, is to hate the human. We need to admire less our *Audubon Society Magazine*, with its lovely scenes of nature empty of human presence, and appreciate more our Grant Wood *American Gothic*. The businessman engaged in strip mining and the environmentalist zealously protecting empty spaces are closer than they think. Against them stands the farmer, user of the land, cultivator of it, worshiping and working with friends and family. It is a model of the truly human, and we cannot see it too often.

E. Christian Kopff is professor of classics at the University of Colorado and an editor of Classical Journal.

MUSIC

Selling the Farm: Country Music in the 80's

by Janet Scott Barlow

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

For 30 years country music has alternately ignored and embraced that small truth, always bouncing between the apparent threat of extinction and last-minute rescue. And now, after a decade of "evolution" and "transition," the country music industry again is surprised that the real thing was good enough all along; that, indeed, the real thing may be the only thing. In spite of losses (Ernest Tubb is gone; Tammy Wynette hasn't had a hit in years) and distractions (country music videos), the line separating traditional and contemporary music is obvious once more.

A path of musical influence and affection and homage can be followed backward from John Anderson to George Jones to Hank Williams; from Emmylou Harris to Kitty Wells to the Carter Family; from Ricky Skaggs to Bill Monroe; from Merle Haggard to Lefty Frizzell; from Willie Nelson to a whole lot of people. But a trip backward from Barbara Mandrell ends up at Wayne Newton. Kenny Rogers is a Nashville version of Perry Como, and Alabama is a rock group for people who don't like rock. This is the Too-Easy Listening School of country music, and its popularity has given new meaning to the term *crossover*, obscuring the essence and function of country music with a mechanical blend of down-home showmanship and uptown talent. While there is no law against success, there *is* something sad and ridiculous and pointless about generic country music. It is enough to know that Kenny Rogers' songs are played in public elevators.

The blurring of distinctions, the dilution of definitions, the confusion of the organic with the synthetic are nothing new to country music. What started in the 50's as a stopgap to rock 'n' roll—which, it was feared, made country music vulnerable to its own hillbilly constrictions—took off in earnest during the 60's. It was then that the powers that be in Nashville, Chet Atkins first among them, discovered the formula. They found that by dulling the edge of the traditional country sound they could broaden their current market while recasting their hokey image. Guided by the questionable premise that a progressively more homogenized country audience naturally expected a progressively more homogenized country sound, these men began to define the music by someone else's terms and play the game by someone else's rules.

The result was some overdressed but still recognizable country music. Nashville was turning out hits that forced fans to listen around the violins to get to the good stuff, which was irritating but not impossible. But Nashville, already hooked on the idea that you can't have too much of a good thing, was prepared to make it irritating *and* impossible.

By the late 70's, the country music industry had grown so aggressively cosmopolitan, so purposefully "relevant," that it turned out songs that didn't sound like country songs, to be performed by singers who didn't sound like country singers, on records that

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had French horns but no fiddles. Steel guitars were as rare as yodeling cowboys, and what the hell was going on? Whatever it was, it worked. The folks responsible for the "product" had learned that the more they junked up country music—that is, the more like pop they made it sound while still insisting it was country—the wider was its appeal. (Wider, yes; deeper, no. But they didn't realize that yet.)

As this calculated process was reaching its peak, things were getting hot on the consumer front. A segment of the public whose affinities were not rooted and whose attention span was limited—the floaters and the fad-makers—was cranking up to try something new by discovering something old. Bingo. Aided by the movies and all things Texan, "country" music was suddenly in, the diversion of the moment for a lot of grown men and women in cowboy suits who were getting back to basics with a vengeance.

The success of this particular product with this particular audience contained no small irony. While country music was burying its history in a play for the commercial big time, the weekend cowboys thought they were enjoying a little piece of the past. Since the music was about as authentic as the cowboys, the gag was obvious if not funny.

The whole thing was mainly the culmination of nothing more (or less) than classic American marketing: fit a product to a need; or, create a need to fit a product. In this case, determining whether the product created the need, or vice versa, was tricky but ultimately meaningless, since everyone seemed happy.

All that suffered was the music—and certain bewildered fans, who apparently were in the minority. These fans, the lifers, had hung on through the Nashville Sound, but "mainstream" was something else. They simply couldn't make do with the likes of Sylvia. (You mean, when I've got the dark twirlies, and blue's my middle name, and I need to be carried off, *this* is what I'm supposed to turn to?) But they were lonesome, not crazy, and they knew that country music couldn't be two things at once, that "progressive country" was a contradiction in terms. These fans knew their own needs; by that knowledge they understood what country music does, and by that understanding they knew what country music is. Within this pure understanding of its meaning is country music's salvation (time and again) and its strength.

By function, country music is not entertainment. It is nurture. It serves a need unfailingly, the need being the simultaneous expression of yearning and fulfillment. Non-fans who typically complain that all traditional country songs sound alike are, at once, missing the point and saying more than they realize. The music's predictable narrowness is both its chief beauty and first requirement—the fan's guarantee that the same internal space will always be occupied, the same response always prompted, the same need always met. Being unaligned with fashion or taste or style (the world of the temporary), true country music protects its own legacy and remains blessedly immune to the diminishing effects of nostalgia. Years pass, the names and faces change, but the sound is a rock. If you want surprises, well, listen to jazz. Accusing country music of being lyrically unsophisticated or musically uncomplicated is like saying ballet would be better without so much dancing. Roy Blount Jr. once wrote that "[country music] is sometimes very good, and sometimes when it is bad it is even better." While this observation hints at the "I Love Country Because It's So Tacky" attitude of too-clever critics, it makes an important point. "Bad" country music isn't *bad*, as in "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool"—possibly the most self-conscious and unsoulful "country" song ever recorded. Bad is more on the order of "I'm Going to Hire a Wino to Decorate Our Home," a goofy country song that gets the job done because its sound and its heart are both in the right place.

To be put off by country's "hick" image or attracted by country's "new" image—to judge its *form*—is already to have missed the point. When country music's form—its style, manner, image—became an end in itself rather than a natural outgrowth of the music, urban cowboys were the result. Crystal Gayle was the result. "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool" was the result. When form is its own excuse for being, unintentional parody is always the upshot. The bloodless search for the components of mass popularity did to country music what all the tub-thumpers and drinking songs and musical plainness never could: It turned country music into a joke—at least for a time, at least on the surface.

But at the height of the silliness, a country singer came along who demonstrated perfectly all that was seductive about the idea of form, all that was deceptive about it, and all the reasons to ignore it. Both the problem and its solution could be seen in Willie Nelson.

When Willie Nelson hit it big, he had style to spare. In addition to talent, he had qualities considered rare among country entertainers—mystique and "taste." Here at last was a country singer who was not a cliché, a country singer fit for the music *aficionado*. He became everyone's pet overnight, adored by his new public as Willie the Outlaw, and by critics as Willie the Fearless Experimenter. People who didn't like country music liked Willie Nelson.

But the fans who were not a part of his musical cult, the ones who had known him before the birth of his aura and image(s), knew something about Willie that everyone else seemed to miss. He was first and last a country singer, one who just happened to be given to some musical messing around. These fans were content to indulge him or wait him out because his voice made a sound at once unique and predictable; because part of it slid through his nose just right; because he sang *ember* as three syllables, with the added *um* in the middle the clincher; because not even *he* could undermine his country credentials. They knew instinctively that form gained meaning only in the absence of substance, and here was the substance: When you needed to head home, Willie Nelson singing 30 seconds of a clunker like "Unchained Melody" would get you closer than Eddie Rabbitt singing all of Hank Williams. (Eddie Rabbitt singing "I Love a Rainy Night" would leave you stranded forever.)

The substance and power of country music depend on the music's un-self-conscious connection to its own past. It justifies itself only when and because it sounds like itself. Willie Nelson wears an earring—which raises the

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question, Would Kitty Wells sport a tattoo? No, but it doesn't much matter. Willie Nelson's image is no more significant than, say, Porter Wagoner's when Porter, his Nudie suit aglitter, his mystique nonexistent, gives his honest hillbilly best on "I've Enjoyed as Much of This as I Can Stand." Willie and Porter are two versions of the same lesson: When the sound is true, style is no more than gift-wrapping. (Which makes T.G. Sheppard one example of the converse: When the sound is contrived, style is no less than the whole empty package.) It all comes down to the First Law of Country Music: If you have to work to find it, it ain't *it*. (And from which follows: If you don't know *it* when you hear it, you deserve T.G. Sheppard.)

This idea is the foundation of the lifer's musical value system, and it supports the natural pairing of mutually dependent responses. The first, a type of suspended disbelief—a musical act of faith that permits the acceptance of just about anything (earrings on men, songs about wino decorators) —functions only and always in the presence of the second, the listener's abolute certainty that the music will never betray his trust. The thinking is circular; the circle is prescribed; the payoff is foolproof. When, for instance, George Jones manages to break hearts *and* restore spirits with the wonderfully absurd line "with the blood from my body I could start my own still," all faith is rewarded, all cases are closed.

It is galling but finally irrelevant that George Jones must share a job description with Ronnie "She's an 80's Kind of Girl" McDowell. Yes, you *can* fool some of the people all of the time; but the operative word in that adage is *some*. Because its integrity is guarded more closely by those who need it than by those who make it, country music outlives its pretensions, its commercialism, and even its own crazy generosity (being ever ready to welcome into the fold discarded pop singers like Jimmy Buffett, Marie Osmond, and—good grief—Florence Henderson).

Country music was never meant to be received by the mind, or even the heart. It is absorbed somewhere in the vicinity of the bones. Bluegrass and honky-tonk, mountain ballads and country blues—this music survives through the loving, stubborn understanding of those who are fed by its sound.

Janet Scott Barlow has written for Music & Sound Output, Parents *magazine, and* Commonweal.

STAGE

A (Re)Movable Feast

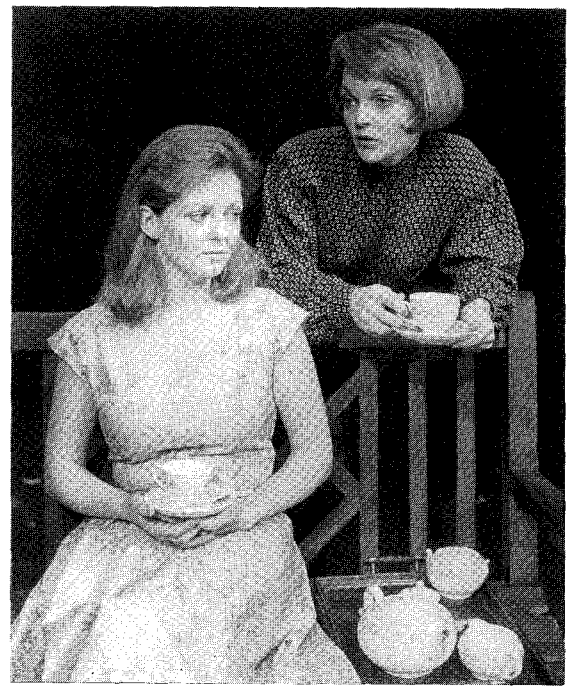
by David Kaufman

> "A morality which has within it no room for truth is no morality at all"
>
> —Flaubert

> " . . . But the thing is, you know, let's face it, there's a whole enormous world out there that I don't ever think about, and I certainly don't take responsibility for how I've lived in that world. I mean, if I were actually to confront the fact that I'm sort of sharing this stage with the starving person in Africa somewhere, well then I wouldn't feel so great about myself. So naturally I blot those people out of my perception. So, of course, I'm ignoring a whole section of the real world. . . . Of course we all know that the theater is in terrible shape today. I mean, you know, at least a few years ago people who really cared about the theater used to say, 'The theater is dead.' But now everyone has redefined the theater in such a trivial way. You know, I mean, I know people who are involved with the theater who go to see things now that—I mean, a few years ago these same people would have just been *embarrassed* to have *seen* some of these plays. But *now* they say, 'Oh, that was pretty good.' It's just incredible. And I just find that attitude unbearable, because I actually do believe that the theater can be very important —it can actually help people come in contact with reality. Now you may not feel that at all. You may find that absurd."
>
> —Wally in *My Dinner With Andre* by Wallace Shawn and Andre Gregory

If contemporary drama is as ailing and derivative as many are finding it, no one has yet observed the extent to which our theater has been up against a new form of competition and a new influence. Though oblique and amorphous, this new kind of theater is intense and pervasive. It has nothing to do with a script *per se*, but the importance of the costume and characterization—and especially *attitude*—has become even more pronounced, as if to compensate for the absence of other, more conventional theatrical elements.

In this new version of theater, the very notion of a stage has been replaced by a sense of environment. Even the concept of the Fourth Wall has become obsolete as the roles that used to separate the spectator from the spectacle have been thoroughly broken down. The supreme examples of this new genre of theater occur today in what are generally perceived as "decadent" contexts—the late-night dance clubs that tend to come alive after



Left to right: Ellen Parker and Pamela Reed in a scene from Wallace Shawn's Aunt Dan and Lemon. *Photo by Carol Rosegg.*

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midnight and would lead a spectator to believe that at least half of America is unemployed, the other half independently wealthy. Nor is it irrelevant to note that this new theater is decidedly self-conscious and amoral.

Though it undoubtedly has references which a cultural scientist could trace back to the stages of Attica or even earlier, a more direct harbinger for this revolutionary state of theater emerged in the early 1970's, in a seemingly meaningless movie called *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. More to the point, it wasn't the movie itself that mattered so much as the cult following that evolved around it, usually at midnight showings on Friday nights in major cities throughout the country.

As you may or may not recall, during those midnight screenings, members of the audience would position themselves in front of the screen and act out musical numbers along with the performers on screen. Many others would remain in their seats. But even from that more traditional vantage point they would often mime along with the actors; or at appropriate moments they would employ the various props they brought with them (for example, opening their umbrellas when it started to rain on screen to protect themselves from the *real* water that was being sprayed by their neighbors in the auditorium).

In retrospect, the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* phenomenon appeared as some sort of spontaneous cultural combustion that consumed the clearly delineated lines between audience and spectacle. The viewer suddenly became some weird variation on a theme, at once a voyeur as well as an exhibitionist, while the very definition of theater was assuming new proportions and ground rules.

In the intervening dozen or so years since *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, this new kind of theater has metamorphosized yet again. Now it can be found in the numerous clubs and discos that have become our new temples of performance and diversion—places where people go as much to be seen as to see or to dance, where everyone is both "on" stage and "off" stage at the same time, and where an identity can be assumed (and shed) with the same facility that actors change clothes.

This new theater can best be observed at places like *Area*, which features different themes every few weeks and hires people to perform or assume tableaux in the midst of the festivities; or *Palladium*, which used to be theater and now uses honest-to-goodness stage settings as backdrops to the dance floor; or *Limelight*, which is literally a converted church; or the *Saint*, which offers fashion shows and performance pieces while everyone present is involved in a performance of their own, for themselves and for each other.

Superficially, anyway, Wally Shawn's *Aunt Dan and Lemon* has absolutely nothing to do with the kinds of theater I'm describing above. It uses actors and actresses who interpret a script on an utterly conventional stage before a conventionally seated audience. But on a much deeper level, this controversial drama only begins to make sense in the climate of the new theatrical context that has spilled over into other aspects of our culture, a culture which often confuses image for substance and rhetoric for ideas.

Quite justifiably, many have accused *Aunt Dan and Lemon* of not behaving as a play ought to. It is more a series of disquisitions and unsettling monologues on highly charged moral and political topics than it is a play with exposition, plot, interaction, and resolution. In some respects, it is reminiscent of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, but it is even more disturbing than that abrasive work was, since it has coyly presented itself in serene and ingenuous tones. More than anything else, it seems to have redefined the role of the audience. Like so many plays of the past 20 years, *Aunt Dan* acknowledges the audience's presence to an extraordinary degree. But despite its evident hospitality, it refuses to be either hospitable or direct in its wicked insinuations and implicit accusations. It incorporates the audience into its scheme at the same time that it degrades and insults each and every member by compelling them to conclude that they are as incapable of "compassion" as the next person, and by equating Nazi genocide with the extermination of cockroaches in one's own kitchen.

As an ardent fan of the work when it premiered here last November, fresh from the Royal Court Theatre in London, I was looking forward to the subsequent production that opened in late March. Aside from a change in all but one of the seven cast members, the newer production would share the same director, the same scenery, costume, lighting and sound designers with the original version. It would even be performed on the same stage space at the Public Theater's Martinson Hall. And most importantly, it would be the same play.

The same play that Frank Rich in the *Times* had christened "the most stimulating, not to mention demanding, American play to emerge this year"; even as he explained that it is "about how literate, civilized societies can drift en masse into beastliness and commit the most obscene acts of history." The same play that John Simon ridiculed as a "poor, unappetizing worm wriggling around the stage and pretending to be an iconoclastic play though it merely offends against taste, intelligence, and basic hygiene as it waits for someone to step on it and put it and its captive audience (no intermission, of course!) out of their misery." The same play that Robert Brustein found "impossible to evaluate . . . in dramatic terms." The same play whose author admitted he "intentionally set out to leave the audience frustrated and unsatisfied."

So why, I must wonder aloud, is my response to this new production diametrically opposed to what it was originally? How can I be so disappointed that I even feel ashamed by my earlier enthusiastic reaction? Though Kathy Whitton Baker, as the anorexic and wistful narrator, Lemon, is not as effectively sedate or graceful as her predecessor Kathryn Pogson, and though that fine actress Pamela Reed, as the pontificating and influential Aunt Dan, is not as firm nor as eccentric as Linda Hunt in the same role, neither departs fundamentally enough from the previous interpretations to account for so radically different a response to the play itself.

In his last major work, the film *My Dinner With Andre*, co-written with Andre Gregory, Shawn presented a dialectic which prompted hyperbolic comparisons with Plato and with Shaw. With that film, Shawn recalculated the medium of the scripted dialogue by creating a sort of fictional

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documentary.

In his dinner with avant-garde theater director Andre Gregory, Shawn came across as the pragmatist to Gregory's hardened idealist. The plot was confined to their meeting for dinner at an "expensive" restaurant; but under the circumstances, the very idea of a "plot" was obliterated, replaced, or engulfed by the conversation they had instead. The theme of their discussion is the nature and quality of theater in contemporary society, and the very possibility or improbability of life in the contemporary world. What struck some as stimulating seemed sophomoric to others. Still, it was generally conceded that the film succeeded in making the viewer feel like a guest at their table. The true test of *My Dinner With Andre*'s durability as a work of art would be to recast the two roles and see how it fares. But the very notion of two other actors portraying Wally and Andre becomes preposterous and unfathomable.

Upon first viewing, Shawn's session with *Aunt Dan and Lemon* seemed that much more invigorating than his dinner with Andre. As he claimed in an interview with *Time*, "At the risk of sounding self-pitying, the project taxed my resources to the limit and sometimes beyond. It took more brains than I had, and to figure out how to write it, I had to borrow some of next year's brains and the next year's brains as well."

In *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, Shawn offers both more and less of a "plot" than in his previous work. It begins when the effete and wasted Lemon, short for Leonora, addresses us from her armchair in her London flat: "Hello, dear audience, dear good people who have taken yourselves out for a special treat, a night at the theater. Hello, little children. How sweet you are, how innocent. If everyone were just like you, perhaps the world would be nice again, perhaps we all would be happy again." Strictly speaking, all that transpires is simply part of the story that Lemon imparts, which she claims is "everything about my life." Her life, it would seem, is nothing more than her abiding memories of the eponymous Aunt Dan, short for Danielle, who was a friend of Lemon's parents and who became the overriding influence on Lemon. In fact, even Lemon's parents are recalled only as they relate to Aunt Dan; and the remaining eight characters are all figures in stories told in turn by Aunt Dan, as relayed here by Lemon.

As we soon learn, Lemon's mother met Aunt Dan when they were in college together and became instant friends. Dan went on to become "one of the youngest Americans ever to teach at Oxford." Lemon's earliest memory is of when she was three. Aunt Dan was already a fixture in her family constellation and became for Lemon, if not exactly a surrogate parent, then at least a preferred one.

Although perhaps we should bear in mind that the entire play is refracted through Lemon's unusual vision, Aunt Dan is also presented as an extremely eccentric figure. She is posed as a brilliant intellectual who dwells on her respect for Kissinger: "You see I don't care if he's arrogant or boastful. . . . You can hardly call him a frivolous man. . . . That look on his face is there because he has seen the power of evil in the world." In another instance, she defends her admiration for Kissinger in one of many extended monologues: "I'm simply saying that it's terribly easy for us to criticize. It's terribly easy for us to sit here and give our opinions on the day's events. And while we sit here in the sunshine and have our discussions about what we've read in the morning papers, there are these certain *other* people, like Kissinger, who happen to have the very bad luck to be society's leaders. And while we sit here chatting, they have to do what has to be done. And so *we* chat, but *they* do what they *have* to do."

For the most part, Aunt Dan's sentiments are not exactly illogical, nor are they easily refuted, which becomes part of Shawn's carefully calibrated deception. Shawn presents genteel people in an overly gentle package that has the cadence and the mood of a fairy tale or a bedtime story for adults. But such gentility is offset by the casual references to some of the most troubling and distressing issues that threaten civilization today. Shawn has penned a paradox, really, wherein the charming and demure Lemon alludes to her obsessive "reading about the Nazi killing of the Jews," and her subsequent casual remark that "today, of course, the Nazis are considered dunces, because they lost the war, but it has to be said that they managed to accomplish a great deal of what they wanted to do. They were certainly successful against the Jews."

This serves as a prelude to the more scandalous diatribe she offers during her closing monologue. As before, the shock value is increased because the lines are delivered by the ostensibly innocent and lovely Lemon. As with other fragments I have lifted from the text, I quote at length to convey a sense of Shawn's style:

> So it becomes absurd to talk about the Nazis as if the Nazis were unique. That's a kind of hypocrisy. Because the fact is, no society has ever considered the taking of life an unpardonable crime or even, really, a major tragedy. It's something that's done when it has to be done, and it's as simple as that. . . . Now when people say, "Oh the Nazis were different from anyone, the Nazis were different from anyone," well, perhaps that's true in at least one way, which is that they observed themselves extremely frankly in the act of killing, and they admitted frankly how they really felt about the whole process. Yes, of course, they admitted, it's very unpleasant, and if we didn't have to do it in order to create a way of life that we want for ourselves, we would never be involved in killing at all. But since we have to do it, why not be truthful about it, and why not admit that yes, yes, there's something inside us that likes to kill. . . . Because if there's one thing I learned from Aunt Dan, I suppose you could say it was a kind of honesty.

Shawn's theme is not so much society's need to kill in the name of Right, nor the absence or atrophy of "compassion" in today's self-serving world, nor even as the jacket-copy to the published version of the script suggests, "the ease with which good and bad become reconciled in the human mind." Rather, it's an indictment of

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the inherent hazards of influence. At the end of Lemon's initial monologue, she claims, "To me what matters really is the people you knew, the things you learned from them, the things that influenced you deeply and made you what you are."

In the larger sense, the entire play is merely a demonstration of Aunt Dan's influence over Lemon, which the audience infers can represent a microcosm of Shawn's influence over us. But the loophole in Shawn's scenario is that, unlike Lemon, we need not succumb. What I appreciated the first time I saw the play was the connection Shawn made between a naive disposition and weighty or corrupting matters, as well as the ingenious way he packaged his insights. What I came to realize the second time around is that Shawn's own politics are more suspect than they seemed, and more directly manifested by the words he has given his characters to speak. Though he condemns his heroine by default, and also by default he implicates us in the process, he offers no viable alternative to the deplorable state of affairs he finds surrounding him.

On the premise that this is a fiction and that one should trust the teller and not the tale after all, Shawn's appendix to the published script seems more reliable and decisive a resource for determining his stance. In "On the Context of the Play," he begins by describing the human motive for comfort and by saying that "what in fact prevents me more than anything else from feeling really comfortable . . . is actually the well-intentioned ethical training I received as a child. My parents brought me up to believe that there was something terribly important called morality." So far, so good. But he proceeds over the course of the next 20 pages to employ a Cartesian mode arguing for the abolition of morality. "As I write these words, in New York City in 1985, more and more people who grew up around me are making this decision; they are throwing away their moral chains and learning to enjoy their true situation: Yes, they are admitting loudly and bravely, we live in beautiful homes, we're surrounded by beautiful gardens, our children are playing with wonderful toys, and our kitchen shelves are filled with wonderful food."

Shawn's primary motivation as revealed here is guilt; but surely there are more constructive ways for coping with guilt than Shawn grasps, as even Freud allowed, and as even Woody Allen would probably agree (it's not for nothing that Shawn reminds us of a Woody Allen without laughs).

"Because," according to Shawn, "the difference between a perfectly decent person and a monster is just a few thoughts," and since "morality is only a few thoughts in our heads," and considering that "all of our attitudes flow into action, flow into history, the bedroom and the battlefield soon seem to be one," there can be no position we can afford to take. But as most thinking and feeling creatures realized long ago, no position is still a position of sorts. Amorality cannot be divorced from morality as Shawn might prefer to imagine. Finally, Shawn undermines himself and serves as an instructive example for all of us by showing how quite possibly those who take morality to the nth degree might very well be left with what *appears* to be no morality at all.

At its worst, *Aunt Dan and Lemon* can be dismissed as the cumulative rebuttal to the hundreds of liberal-minded articles that have appeared in *The New Yorker*, that bastion of "correct" thinking for which Shawn's father, William, has served as editor for 40 years or so. If only his father had consented to publish his articles, then perhaps we would have been spared what amounts to a not-so-innocent —though terribly naive—piece of political theater.

David Kaufman is a theater critic in New York City.

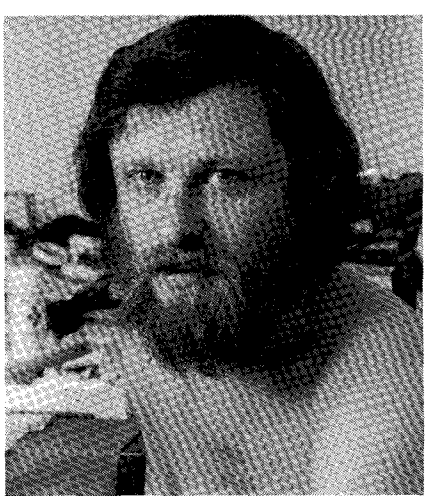
ART

Triptych of a Tartar

by Andrei Navrozov

"The terrible thing, my dear, is not that they call Schnabel the Michelangelo of our time. They call everybody the Michelangelo of our time. The terrible thing is that Michelangelo was really the Schnabel of his time, and I'm the only one who will tell you so." The speaker, red-bearded and blue-eyed, is so slight of build that nothing he says sounds as a challenge. His accent is more peculiar than Russian, and it helps him make the girl from Boston laugh. "You know, Igor," she says, at once playful and conspiratorial, basking in the strange weightlessness of intellectual freedom that seems to fill the old house, "I never really liked Michelangelo." She wants to go on; to tell him she never heard anyone say things like this in college; to ask him if he really means it all; and a thousand other questions; but she doesn't know where to begin, and anyway, he interrupts. "You nice girl, dear," he says, pouring iced, gem-green vodka from a crystal decanter half-filled with black currant leaves. "But you need husband."

Thus passes a Sunday afternoon at Igor Galanin's studio, the top floor of his house, hidden in the woods of Westchester County, New York. But on weekdays the scene is different. Or is it? The stereo murmurs Verdi, the exotic plants have been watered, the morning pours in through the windows and the skylight, and the little man stands by his worktable, painting



Igor Galanin

the thigh of an imaginary reclining nude. The figure he has drawn is sculptural, solemn, startling, like a paradox of genius; but its surroundings

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on that canvas—the Empire couch, the pearly landscape, and especially the tiny bearded man wearing a bowler hat who stands by his easel painting a self-portrait—make one smile an inward and disarmed smile. The work is far from finished, but the figure is already vying with the nudes of Rubens and Ingres. But just as soon as its beauty has spoken, another voice chimes in. "You nice girl, dear," the tiny bearded man with the black bowler seems to be telling her, "but you need husband."

Igor Galanin was born in Moscow in 1937, the legendary year marking the height of Stalin's terror, to a Jewish mother and a father whose roots, recorded in the Velvet Books of Russian nobility, can be traced back to the Mongol invasion of the 13th century. ("All that money to put them through Hotchkiss," the artist says proudly of his two children, now in their first year at Yale, "and still they look Tatar!") The seven centuries of recorded history on his father's side make him view the Protestant aristocracy of his adopted country with gentle skepticism; his mother's practicality and wisdom, and his own experience of survival as an artist under the Soviet regime, help him keep a realistic distance between his world and the world of his patrons. He considers himself a "quintessential bourgeois, like Balzac," and of course that description, like so much about this man, is itself a paradox.

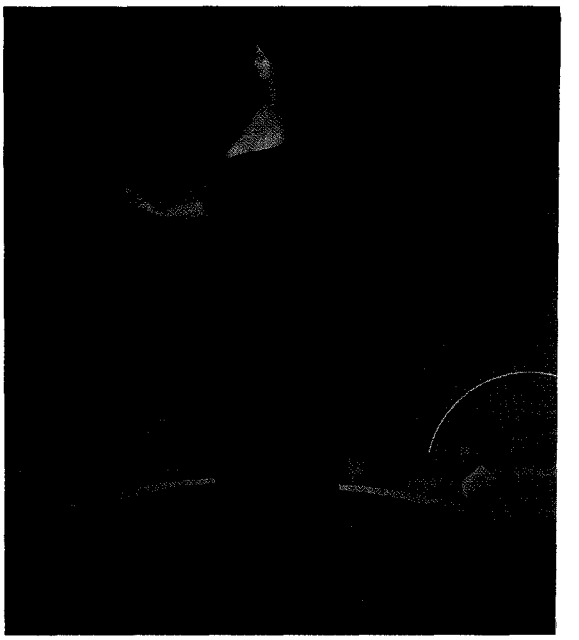
In 1972, when the opportunity he terms "divine" presented itself, Galanin, with his wife and two children, then five years old, left his native Moscow. While waiting for U.S. entry visas in Italy, a standard procedure for all Iron-Curtain refugees, Galanin, who had achieved prominence in Russia only as an illustrator of children's books and theater designer, had his first show at the Paesi Nuovi gallery in Rome. The Americans who bought out the show brought word of the artist home, and within a year after his arrival a second show was arranged in—of all places—Fishers Island, New York, whose 18-page telephone directory listed, in 1983, four Du Ponts, five Fergusons, five Gaillards, two Lords, four Russells, a Whitney—John Hay Whitney, to be precise—with a Symington, a Phelps, and a Boocock nestling cozily in between. This show, too, was a success—as were others, in Boston, that paved the way for Galanin to meet Joachim Jean Aberbach, whom he calls "the poet of art dealers," and to his first "real" exhibition in 1978 at Aberbach Fine Art in New York. The paintings in that show were sold in a matter of days; between 1978 and 1983 came five more such shows. This year is no exception; Igor Galanin's seventh one-man show at Aberbach Fine Art opened in March.

For those who buy them, and for many who just come to look, Galanin's paintings are a revelation. They seem at once to distill history, of which the history of art is but a fragment, and mock it—but lovingly, tenderly, as a parent might the accomplishments of a child. Independent-minded ("seditiously inclined," as Galanin puts it) collectors find this refreshing, and addictive. By contrast, many professional art critics have taken this "whimsy" as an affront, almost an insult directed at them and at their calling. But obviously a man who speaks of Michelangelo and Schnabel with equal irreverence—and of Ingres and Bailey with similar admiration—is unruffled by what critics think. Besides, he has his defenders in the press gallery as well. Theodore Wolff, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor* of a 1982 series of Galanin paintings, commented:

> They were not, after all,
> intended to make a great deal
> of logical sense, only to delight,
> amuse, intrigue, and enchant.
> And neither were they intended
> to reflect a concern for the great
> formal or theoretical questions
> of the day. They are too happy
> and carefree for that—
> although they do have just
> enough melancholy to make
> them look "modern," and just
> enough enigma to make
> them feel at home in the age
> that produced Rousseau's "The
> Sleeping Gypsy" and the
> strange and fantastic goings-on
> in the canvases of de Chirico,
> Ernst, Dali, and Magritte.

That put Galanin in pretty good company.

Galanin's often deliberately preposterous pronouncements—on subjects ranging from American politics ("I want a triumvirate for President: [North Carolina Senator] Jesse Helms, [New York Mayor] Ed Koch, and [*Harper's* Editor] Lewis Lapham") to higher education ("I am against it") to contemporary poetry ("Lynch Merrill," the motto on a T-shirt he contemplates ordering, is aimed at poet James Merrill, scion of the famous banking family)—have amused and, on occasion, antagonized his reviewers and potential patrons alike. The wiser among them have kept in mind that for a Russian of Galanin's milieu, "the Tongue," in Catherine the Great's phrase, "is there to whip the Air." Only in one's work, balancing the real and the imaginary, the serious and the whimsical, the eternal and the transitory, must the artist find that unique equilibrium for which he is ultimately answerable. Galanin's heterodox opinions contain more than mere grains of truth; but, more important, he knows that in the end he will not be judged by them. Leading an impeccably bourgeois life-style, saying things that raise bourgeois eyebrows, painting pictures—of Victorian comfort, of aristocratic games, of "life as I wish I could live it"—he insists he is not an "enigma." What is he, then? "A free man."



"Woman With Rabbit" by Igor Galanin.

Andrei Navrozov is editor of The Yale Literary Magazine *and a contributing editor to* Chronicles.

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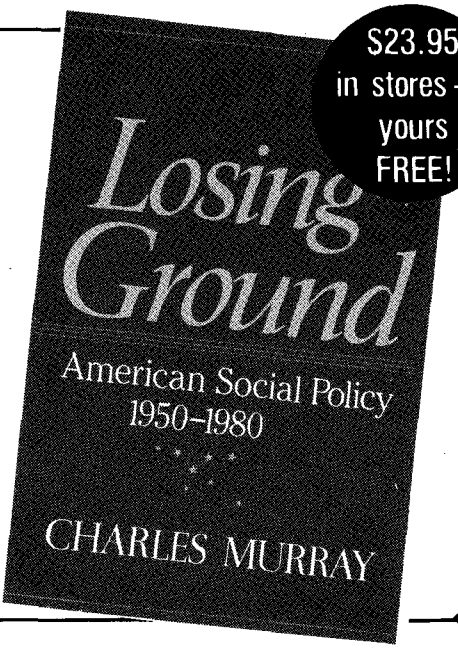

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